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UNDERNEATH, DEEP DOWN: A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

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## **ABSTRACT**

This project considers the lives of seemingly anonymous passersby on public transport in various cities around the world. These stories deal with love; loss; the manifestation and transcendence of souls; growth; coming of age; coming into connection with oneself, as well as the world. The following collection is ultimately aimed at encouraging each reader to pause and consider other lives that often seem inconsequential.

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## Reflective Essay

I've considered myself a writer for the last five years, but as you read this today, you are looking at the first full project I've devoted myself to. This collection of short stories is the culmination of a year of travel, experience, love, loss, and growth. When I was presented with the task of writing a creative thesis, I mulled over the idea of a novella, until I realized that I wanted to create something that expressed the diversity that exists in human life. Ultimately, I settled on a collection of short stories that would be as diverse as the experience of the human condition itself.

One of the most meaningful gifts I ever received was Raymond Carver's *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, which I received from my uncle on an otherwise inconsequential birthday. Reading Carver's work, I was mesmerized by the way he wrote with clarity and insight gleaned over years of studying people and their interactions. Carver is a contemporary master—it says so on the cover of his book—and a large portion of that accolade comes from his ability to understand the inner workings of people; what makes them tick, what makes them happy, what makes them themselves. I was enamored by Carver's talent from the beginning, transformed as a reader by the way he so effortlessly expressed subtext through sometimes short, basic stories. While we have very different styles of writing, I looked up to him as an inspiration for the moving pieces behind his stories, for his ability to truly understand, and then express that understanding artfully - through nuanced stories of American life. Near the end of Carver's book, the final lines of the penultimate story read as follows:

I could hear my heart beating. I could hear everyone's heart. I  
could hear the human noise we sat there making, not one of us  
moving, not even when the room went dark (154).

I wanted to create something that would stand up to the test of time, that would encompass the human noise, through pieces that would hold resonance if my thesis were to be picked up by someone in twenty years. However, Carver's style was never something I envied; in fact, when I first read his work, I thought his diction was rather bland. If Raymond Carver was my inspiration for the movement behind my stories, George Saunders was my inspiration for the nearly tangible beauty within.

I became well acquainted with Saunders' work through a variety of creative writing courses my first two years of college. Saunders, another master in American literature, writes stories that seem to break his readers open, through plot as well as language. He writes so beautifully, with a distinct style that makes me feel like I'm falling in love with the words he puts on a page. His stories often have dramatic plots, with overwhelming climaxes and satisfying denouements, but I found that what I was most drawn to was his glorious syntax and style. His writing, simply put, is enviable. It's hearty; when I read Saunders' work, I'm amazed at his storytelling skills and his pure talent with words.

I once heard that the evolution of art is the ability to get away with stealing, and in some ways, that is what I have tried to do, with George Saunders as my target. I've attempted to blend the best of Carver and Saunders, and create something that is both satisfying and beautiful.

When fleshing out the motivation behind my thesis, I was introduced to two pieces written by Virginia Woolf: *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*, as well as *An Unwritten Novel*. *An Unwritten Novel*, which appears in a collection of short stories entitled *Monday or Tuesday*, tells the story of an elusive train passenger, given the name Minnie Marsh, who is described by the narrator as a character harboring a dark secret. The narrator in Woolf's story fabricates an entire life for Minnie, only for that fictional existence to come to a definite close when Minnie leaves

the train and meets a boy who looks like her son, a stark contrast from the childless woman the narrator assumes Minnie is. The story ends on a hopeful, human note, in which Woolf's narrator questions the assumptions made, and seeps into the immense possibilities the world has to offer.

Who are you? Why do you walk down the street? Where to-night  
will you sleep, and then, to-morrow? Oh, how it whirls and surges-  
floats me afresh! I start after them. People drive this way and that.  
The white light splutters and pours. Plate-glass windows.  
Carnations; chrysanthemums. Ivy in dark gardens. Milk carts at the  
door. Wherever I go, mysterious figures, I see you, turning the  
corner, mothers and sons; you, you, you. I hasten, I follow. This, I  
fancy, must be the sea. Grey is the landscape; dim as ashes; the  
water murmurs and moves. If I fall on my knees, if I go through  
the ritual, the ancient antics, it's you, unknown figures, you I  
adore; if I open my arms, it's you I embrace, you I draw to me-  
adorable world! (70)

In this passage exists explanation for my entire thesis. Woolf's desire to "hasten" and "follow" these mysterious figures into the unknown, to glean from them a story, to let them draw her into connection with the world, was the ultimate motivation behind my watching, listening, and discerning, specifically on public transport, for months.

The five stories in this collection are inspired by nearly eight months of living in places I had never before called home. At twenty years old, I packed my bags and prepared for a semester of studying abroad in London, with plans to travel extensively throughout Europe during that time. These travels were truly life changing; the ability to explore parts of the world

previously unknown to myself was eye opening. While in Europe, I met so many different kinds of people. The time I spent in London took me to Amy Winehouse's local pub; clubs with aerial dancers dangling from the ceiling; a rugby match with an old friend; an amusement park with a group of Brits, where we spent the day laughing and screaming in the cold, persistent rain. Living in London also taught me the meaning of "posh," a word I had only known to mean snooty before living there for four months. I was able to discern where someone was from based on his or her accent, by the way they pronounced certain words, based on the formation of their mouth while they spoke. My weekend travels, sometimes, seemed to transport me to a different time period altogether. Budapest and Prague allowed me to step into a fairytale, with their castles and markets and exquisitely cheap beer. I spent a weekend in Amsterdam getting lost in Vondelpark with my best friend in the entire world, and I spent another weekend in Italy consuming my bodyweight in bread, pasta, and wine.

I was lucky enough to spend Saint Patrick's Day in Dublin; I explored Luxembourg with a boy I love; I jumped off the side of a mountain and was caught by the wind to paraglide through the Swiss Alps; I dressed in a dirndl, sipped German beer, and ate pretzels the size of my head during Springfest; I ran around Barcelona with friends I hadn't seen in months, and I spent a freezing weekend in Paris, eating cheese and bread in front of a shining Eiffel Tower. My experiences abroad were magnificent. As a writer, seeing new places, meeting new people, tasting, touching, and living through the world satisfied a deep, primal craving for me.

While my semester held personal trials and tribulations I could have never prepared for, the experience as a whole produced so much growth for me that I am eternally grateful for every uncomfortable, sometimes even heartbreaking, moment. I was forced to rely on myself for my own happiness, and I submerged myself in each new environment, which acted both as a



distraction, as well as a liaison, for my shifting emotions. I remember walking around each city with peeled-open eyes, eager to soak in every sidewalk crack, the sweeping architecture, the street art, the markets, the faces of every passerby. Every weekend brought a new memory that I will cherish forever.

After my program ended in London, I flew from Heathrow to Tel Aviv, to visit family. My grandparents, originally from the Ukraine, agreed to take me to Russia; I was desperate to visit, and with an Israeli passport and two grandparents who spoke the language, we departed for a five-day journey. Moscow is unlike anywhere I have ever been. There is a noticeable blend of European and Asian influences in the city; you can see the combination in the colors and the architecture of Saint Basil's Cathedral and the Red Square. Sabba, Safta and I ate Georgian food and walked the streets of the beautiful, mystical city. We spent a night in an art museum on the one night a year where every museum in Moscow allows free admission. On our final day, my grandparents met with a friend who was a groomsman in their wedding, while I was given a tour by the friend's granddaughter. She took me to a place where "all the cool kids hang out;" after a thirty-minute walk from where we met, we came across a bunch of old warehouses that had been renovated to different pop-up art shops and galleries. She took pictures of me throughout the day, exploring the city. I'm still waiting on those photos.

My first eureka moment with this thesis came on a subway in Moscow. After struggling our way through too many conflicting directions from severe-looking Russians, my grandfather and I finally ended up on the right subway, headed back to our hotel. The underground in Moscow is considered a UNESCO world heritage site, and it is not hard to understand why. The walls are plastered with elaborate mosaics that paint portraits of important scenes, people, and themes in Russian history. The stations are fabulously clean, and each one has its own color

scheme. Each station I found myself in was nearly as mesmerizing as the streets of the city themselves.

While on the subway with my grandfather, I was struck by the sense of familiarity in a very foreign place; even though I was in a completely new city, where I could not even communicate with the locals, I felt as though I had been there, done that before. Being on the underground there left me with an uncanny sense of déjà vu. I took out my pocket-sized notebook and jotted down the lines you see in the author's note of this thesis. After utilizing subways as my main source of transportation in various cities all over the world, I realized there was something similar about public transport in every place. Whether it was the fleetingness of the moment, the anonymity among strangers, or the sense of entering in one location and exiting in another, I wasn't sure (I came to find out, it's all of the above). What I was sure of, however, was that it was all connected. In every city I was lucky enough to experience, there was the dependability of an overarching feeling connected to the cars that traveled under ground. It was there that, for the first time, I thought there might be a collection of stories hidden in the seemingly mundane act of riding a subway.

Virginia Woolf's essay, *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*, tends to agree. In her response to writer Arnold Bennett's attack on modernist writing, Woolf told the hypothetical story of a railway journey. The railway car carried a character by the name of Mrs. Brown, who Woolf describes as "one of those clean, threadbare old ladies whose extreme tidiness—everything buttoned, fastened, tied together, mended and brushed up—suggests more extreme poverty than rags and dirt" (6). Woolf goes on to make assumptions about her—"I felt that she had nobody to support her," (6)—and, as masterfully as she creates life throughout her work, spins a story that assumes and explains Mrs. Brown life.

The story of her life, however, is unimportant; rather, the point Woolf attempts to make is that “Mrs. Brown is eternal, Mrs. Brown is human nature, Mrs. Brown changes only on the surface” (16). According to Woolf, it is the novelists who get in and out of the car, while Mrs. Brown exists onward, through every passage, both literary and physical. I hope that each character introduced in this thesis is, in his or her own way, a Mrs. Brown that you can imagine.

In each city you read about over the next hundred pages, there are people everyday who walk among throngs of strangers. They swipe their metro cards, wait for a car to enter on a track and open its doors. They sit or stand next to other people who are headed in the same general direction, wait for however long, and then get off, exiting the subway and walking towards the rest of their life. It is that routine action, that seemingly inconsequential bit of so many people’s day, which I find fascinating. Who are these people? Where are they going? Where are they coming from? Look at the ring finger on their left hand – are they wearing a wedding band? Look at the way they touch the hem of their shirt, or the way they run their fingers through their hair – are they anxious, or are they oblivious to their actions, their habits? Are they wearing headphones? If so, what are they listening to? A podcast? Music? A book on tape? If no, what are they listening for? What sort of people are you surrounding yourself with without even knowing? And finally, most importantly, what do you think their story is?

This is a collection of short stories that attempts to give voice to the anonymous passengers all over the world. Though the stories are fiction, there is fundamental truth in each one, exposed by the emotions that course throughout. Whether you realize it or not, fellow passengers on public transport are people themselves; they are someone’s daughter or son, someone’s mother or father, someone’s friend, someone’s lover, someone’s *someone*. My goal was to expose the hidden bits of people, of strangers, that are completely overlooked. To come

back to Carver, I wanted to find out what makes the person sitting across from you on the tube, or the person to your left on the subway in New York City, tick. Everyone's life is as full everyone else's, and I wanted to consider that as I worked through creating this collection. Everyone is someone, and I attempted to give you those stories, that insight, into those strangers.

It is my hope that when you finish reading these five stories, you feel a little bit closer to every human you pass by after. I hope this allows you to see that what we're shown through someone's facial expressions, or their dress, or the way they style their hair, is just the tip of the iceberg. There is so much more to someone than we can ever possibly know by, say, just spending a few passing moments together on a subway. I've tried to tell stories that reflect the love, loss, growth, and experience that I myself have felt over the last year and a half. I hope you find that the stories reflect that for you, too.

I'll leave you with Virginia Woolf's words at the close of *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*, words that left me questioning and considering each person I've ever known, and all the ones I'm bound to meet. I hope they encourage you to sit with the Mrs. Browns just a little longer, to take in every lesson they have to teach.

May I end by venturing to remind you of the duties and responsibilities that are yours as partners in this business of writing books, as companions in the railway carriage, as fellow travellers with Mrs. Brown? For she is just as visible to you who remain silent as to us who tell stories about her. In the course of your daily life this past week you have had far stranger and more interesting experiences than the one I have tried to describe. You have overheard scraps of talk that filled you with amazement. You have

gone to bed at night bewildered by the complexity of your feelings. In one day thousands of ideas have coursed through your brains; thousands of emotions have met, collided, and disappeared in astonishing order. [...] Your part is to insist that writers shall come down off their plinths and pedestals, and describe beautifully if possible, truthfully at any rate, our Mrs. Brown. You should insist that she is an old lady of unlimited capacity and infinite variety; capable of appearing in any place; wearing any dress; saying anything and doing heaven knows what. But the things she says and the things she does and her eyes and her nose and her speech and her silence have an overwhelming fascination, for she is, of course, the spirit we live by, life itself (24).

### **Author's Note**

*I often have overwhelming moments where I can feel myself being alive, a real, existing human being, on subways, metros, undergrounds. It's almost too easy to compare oneself to others, avoid eye contact while attempting to drink in every single person's features, from the cleanliness of their shoes to the way their eyes flicker in the passing blink of fluorescent lights. It's all so exceedingly fleeting that there's a panic in the attempted secret surveillance, in the shared moments of presence underneath the Earth. Lives are consolidated here, secrets and things hidden down deep, compacted in tiny tubes that convey collective human breath. There is little to do but look and wonder.*

## I

### New York City

Something in the air that morning encouraged Josh Boon to blink his eyes open a few minutes before his seven o'clock alarm rang from his bright blue bedside table, which was entirely expected on a day off. After allowing his eyes to adjust to the pink-orange sky that looked rather glorious in the first waking moments of that particular Saturday, he rolled over and pressed his body weight against his wife's backside. Lila responded by arching her body to meet his, and pressed her upper back and neck against the broad expanse of Josh's chest. She heard a deep rumble stir from Josh's inside, cultivated and projected from and through the cavities in his chest, which made her eyes blink open and allowed for the curling corners of a smile to creep onto her face. After a deep inhale, her first full breath of the day, she flipped over quickly to meet his ready stare. There, in the untouched moments of morning, away from the noise and the people and the shrieks and the sirens and the tears and the madness of the outside world, they made love in their two-bedroom apartment in the West Village, on a tiny island with a population of 8.6 million people, located on the East Coast of the United States.

After, when husband and wife had rosy cheeks and small sweat beads on their hairlines, Lila wrapped her limbs into Josh's like the two people were becoming one, and rested her whole body flush against his. The light had brightened and saturated with the passing of time, and the two could see the sun sitting comfortably in a beautiful, cloud-studded sky, cradled by layers of atmosphere and the illusion of dense, pillow-like wisps of air. Barks from small dog-mouths mangled with cries from small human-mouths and the commotion of the day began to seep into Lila and Josh's life from the open window of their eighth-floor apartment. Josh was busy with his morning Sudoku puzzle, which had been a part of his daily routine since Lila had met him

her sophomore year of college, and was now only played when his morning would allow it. She cocked her head back and into the nook of his chest, near his own neck, before she placed soft kisses on his softer skin. There was little Lila loved more than waking up and wrapping herself into her lover, finding the neglected areas of his skin that yelled out for her attention, and smelling the sweet pheromones that wafted up to her nose and encouraged her salivary glands to produce the wetness she'd leave behind on his neck. On atypical mornings when both Dr. Boons weren't called into Mount Sinai, Lila almost absorbed each shared moment of peace and tranquility, the ultimate lifestyle she dreamed of, but one that came with retirement and perhaps a sailboat on some far-off sea in the Mediterranean. Uninterrupted time was a rarity in the City, and for two doctors in high-demand, it was almost unheard of.

When the Boons were granted with that sweet, delectable, scrumptious time off, the two took advantage in the fullest of ways. Josh's circadian clock would wake him before the alarm; the two would make sweet, delectable, scrumptious love; and after, in the morning glow, Lila would place delicate kisses on Josh's neck and help him complete the puzzle, so she'd have his attention again. On this glorious day off, in the first week of May, when the concrete jungle wasn't yet baking from the sun's ray, the Boons had planned to venture to the Botanical Gardens, as Georgia O'Keeffe's work from her time spent in Hawaii was on display, and Lila and Josh had honeymooned on the island of Maui three years before.

Josh was a slow riser, so Lila left the bed first, detangling herself from the intricate pretzel they had formed, and took the sheet with her as she glided towards the bathroom. Josh heard the shower start to run, and he went to join his wife, as their shared shower was another cherished ritual on a double-day-off. Josh remembered how his wife used to leave lipstick notes on the mirror in the early days of his residency, before she was his wife, when she was just a



medical student; Lila would invite him over, and be in the shower when he arrived. He'd make his way into the bathroom, see the fuchsia or coral or blood-orange writing on the wall, and undress right there. Josh had deep, fond associations with shared showers.

Once the two were clean and dry, they readied for the day. Josh turned his alarm-clock-radio to NPR, and made his way towards the small walk-in closet to dress. In the meantime, Lila changed the channel to her favorite indie radio station, and Josh could hear her out-of-tune notes floating in from their bedroom. Smiling, he danced into the room, and pulled his half-naked wife against him, circling around the room with grace. Before their wedding, Lila had begged Josh to take ballroom dance lessons with her, and he skeptically agreed. Lila was delighted to notice the pleasure, apparent on her husband's face, during the weekly hour escape from the hospital; he had proposed at an inconvenient time in his own life, as he was coming to the final years of his residency, and found it increasingly harder to leave work. During those hours away from the outside world, the two soon-to-be doctors shed their lab coats and traded them for black, shiny dance shoes. They walked into the recreation room at the YMCA on 14<sup>th</sup> between 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>, hand in hand, and learned from a shockingly petite Russian lady whose accent was both, somehow, lovely and difficult to discern. Five years after the two took their regular lessons, Josh still found each and every reason to sweep his wife into a tango, or a rumba, or a cha-cha, or even a waltz, when he was feeling both classic and romantic. No matter what dance Josh chose to lead, Lila was just happy to be in his arms, and this day was no different.

When the radio station cut to commercial, the two grudgingly separated, their fingers lingering on each other's skin for moments after their ended embrace. Josh said something about seeing both Georgia's paintings, as well as the native flowers they had in the conservatory, and Lila smiled while her husband spoke about botany and flowers and his deep appreciation for the

outdoors. Lila marveled at the way she never got tired of hearing Josh talk; because he had so many passions and interests, his conversation was her favorite. He knew obscure, esoteric facts about everything from the 1923 Yankees to deliberately hidden parts of Lila's childhood, and respected each morsel of knowledge he had gained as equally important for both his profession as doctor, as well as his profession as human, husband, lover, and hopefully, one day, father.

The Boons had been waiting to conceive until Lila was finished with her pediatric residency, which had ended last year. For the last few months, they'd been trying loosely, with Lila keeping track of her periods and ovulation through an app with a bright-pink background and a name of "My Womanly Tracker." They were both ready, they thought; Josh had finished his residency two years ago, and was on his way to becoming a successful general surgeon with a passion for bone reconstruction and orthopedics. Lila, on the other hand, had been waiting to have kids all her life; while she was always bright, motivated, and more than capable of being alone, she had felt the call towards motherhood before she had any reason for "My Womanly Tracker," and her mother could remember her begging for a baby doll at the ripe age of three. She was wonderful with kids, as well, and first thought she may take a focus in pediatrics during pre-med, so that she could ensure her role in the future of society growing to be healthy, strong, active citizens of the world. It didn't hurt her ped's cause, either, that she was three years younger than Josh, and two years behind him in school. With a pediatric residency, she would be responsible for completing three years compared to Josh's five, and she was conscious of their timeline and the hopeful timeline of their future. When it was time to declare her focus, Josh had just proposed, and the two sat in their leased one-bedroom apartment, taping pieces of construction paper together and creating a timeline for their future with colored Sharpies – yellow for their current state, pink and blue for when they would try for kids (Josh wanted two,

and was adamant about having his first be a boy, but Lila was set on four and had dreamed about an eldest girl), and purple for the retirement years that looked too far down the timeline to properly conceive. By the time the two had pieced together fourteen sheets of paper and a semblance of what their next fifty years would look like, Lila had securely chosen pediatrics on page two.

Lila's maternal nature was one of the things that drew Josh to her in the first place – that, and the way the oxygen in the room seemed to thin out every time she drew her lips into her wide, signature smile. He'd seen the oxygen trick the first time he met her, during his senior year of undergrad. A mentor in the Honors College, he'd been assigned a group of newly accepted honors students to look after during their transition into harder classes, a heavier workload, and a greater set of expectations that would be placed upon them. Walking into the room, he surveyed the fresh faces, and immediately landed on hers. She sat in the third row, wearing a red sweater and a high ponytail, taking notes in a small leather-bound notebook settled precariously between her crossed legs. He took in the remainder of the room, but found his gaze settling back on her. The Dean finished speaking, and the mentors stood in the front of the room, reading the names of their group members for the latter part of orientation, which included a brief meet-and-greet, as well as a reception. When Josh read "Lila Shovale" and the girl with the red sweater looked up with a smile, he felt himself inhale, felt like he was running up Mount Everest and the elevation was growing and the air was thinning and all he could think about was reaching the peak, because somehow, he knew she'd be there. *That's the best party trick I've seen in a while*, he imagined saying to her, and she'd smile again, and he'd feel high, in a state somewhere between endorphins releasing during a marathon-like run and pure, encompassing ecstasy.

Josh pulled his group, comprised of three males, four females (but only one Lila), all on a pre-med track, into a small conference room in the Honors Building, just around the corner from the welcome event. After introducing himself to the mentees he'd be seeing routinely over the next year, he allowed the members of his group to introduce themselves.

"Hi, I'm Lila," she said, volunteering to speak first. "I'm a sophomore, originally from Colorado, majoring in biology on a pre-med track. I'm hoping to go to med school after graduation, but that's still a ways away. Besides that... I love music, love to dance, and love to eat." She finished with a smile, and there it was again, the higher elevation, the endorphins, the ecstasy. Josh didn't know he was going to marry her then, but he was absolutely certain he needed to know everything about Lila Shovale.

The sun outside the Boons' window began to shed warmer rays through the parted curtains, and Josh and Lila collected cell phones and wallets before walking out of apartment 8E, hand in hand. Josh locked the door behind them, and they took the elevator down to the lobby, greeted their favorite doorman, and stepped into the May day.

It took about an hour to get to the Bronx, via the D train running uptown. They got off the subway at Bedford Park Boulevard, and walked fifteen minutes to the garden's entrance. Lila and Josh tried to get to the Garden twice a year, once in spring or summer, and once in autumn or winter. Lila had had a green thumb all her life, ever maternal with all living things, and found every acre of the New York Botanical Garden breathtaking. They avoided tourist traps like the overrated rose garden, and instead opted to get lost in the maze of hydrangeas that managed to bloom in almost every color of the rainbow. They spent an hour in the O'Keeffe exhibition itself, and true to form, Josh spent more time analyzing the quotes and videos that related to the art than the art itself, while Lila went round and round, taking in the paintings from different angles,

squinting her eyes and pouting her lips, conceptualizing the human condition, Josh thought. When the two had had their fill of *Heliconia*, *Pineapple*, and *Hibiscus with Plumeria*, they ventured towards the Haupt Conservatory. There, among three hundred types of plants found in Hawaii, Lila pointed and listed, *frangipani*, *bird-of-paradise*, *bougainvillea*, before coming to *sugarcane* and *papaya*. Josh nodded and smiled and considered himself lucky, like the universe had graced him with a gift he neither understood nor truly deserved. Lila, meanwhile, rubbed small circles with her thumb against Josh's skin, in the soft, padded part of his hand between thumb and index finger. She loved his skin, loved the way his strong hands kept a firm grip on her own, loved the way he never held her hand without intertwining his fingers with hers. She loved the way she had never loved before him, had never uttered the words to a male outside her family, had held onto the idea of L O V E while her girlfriends in high school lost their virginities in the backseat of Chris' or Johnny's or Ben's car, while they said it to their boyfriends in college, their voices thick with alcohol and a mirage of adulthood. Josh knew he loved her after six or so months of dating; the first month of Lila's junior year, during Josh's first visit back to Boston University since graduating, she suggested they venture outside their comfort zone and scour up some new neighborhood of Boston to explore. Deep in the South End, after dinner at a hole-in-the-wall Josh had loved in his early years at BU, Lila led them into a hidden gallery in the SoWa Art and Design District. There, in the old warehouse, empty save for the artist in the corner, intently focused on the easel in front of him, the couple circled and studied the art hung on the walls. Both Lila and Josh would look at the paintings, and then try to sneak peaks at each other without letting the other notice, then look back at the wall before being caught. Stood in front of the second painting to the left of the entrance, Lila stared ahead, concentrating on the abstract lines flowing on the canvas, while Josh stared unabashedly at her.

She felt his gaze on her, and when she looked over, smiling, the words were out of his mouth before he even knew what he was saying. The two weren't even officially dating, unsure of their status with Josh's crazy med school schedule that they were both adjusting to, learning how to live in different cities while feeling tethered and connected and a little intertwined.

"I love you," he said.

Lila's eyes got wide, and Josh saw surprise on her face, then uncertainty, then what looked like a crystal clear realization, all in the span of three seconds.

"I love you. I love you so much," she answered. They got married seven years later, after two breakups when it looked like they'd be over for good, until inevitably, they weren't. Josh felt even safer and happier when he was with Lila than she did when she was with him, but she'd never know it.

They moved away from the conservatory, and Lila begged to go back to the hydrangeas just one more time, because, "You remember they were in my wedding bouquet, right?" and "It's not worth going to see the roses, anyways." After a half-day of wandering, smelling, laughing, touching, and loving, the Boons left the Garden and made their way to the subway station on Belford Park Boulevard.

They boarded the D train headed downtown, and settled into two seats at the far corner of a relatively empty subway car placed neatly in the middle of the whole train. Lila thought of what they may order for dinner, while Josh thought of the hydrangeas he'd pick up for Lila tomorrow on his lunch break at the bodega around the corner from the hospital. She leaned her head against Josh's shoulder while he played Sudoku on his phone; further down the car sat a mother and her two children, and Lila smiled at them all once she lifted her head from the nook of Josh's neck. A few rows in front of the family sat a man listening to music through

headphones, bliss plastered on his face with a small smile and closed eyes, and past him a few rows down sat two girls giggling near the very back of the car. With occupancy for thirty or so people, emptiness lingered with every benign opening and closing of the subway doors that failed to welcome in any new travelers, and Josh thought about the movement of time and how things happen linearly, whether we prepare for them or not.

Having left The Bronx twenty minutes ago, home still felt a ways away when the subway slowed, pulling into the station at 167<sup>th</sup> Street. For the first time since the Boons had stepped on, two men entered the carriage in quick succession, and Lila's head snapped towards the sound of heavy footsteps on decades-old metal. The first man she noticed was big, both tall and wide, with pale skin and a white shirt tucked into tan trousers. He looked like he exercised often and was comfortable chewing tobacco. Right behind him followed a shorter, less broad man, wearing a green and white striped shirt. The larger of the two sat at the edge of the three-seat bench across from the Boons, and slightly to the left. The man in the striped shirt sat as close to him as possible.

Lila's heart beat faster as she looked at the man inside the striped shirt. It was as if she could feel the air leave not only her chest, but the entire car; something about his presence was stripping the oxygen molecules from the atmosphere and she could feel the change in the air. She was reminded of swollen August days, just before a hot thunderstorm, when the air would get thick with anticipation and she would pray for a downpour, something to cut the heat. She looked up and saw the ceiling of the car, and it was as if, in that very instant, she knew there would be no relief for what was to come.

Green Striped Shirt sat next to Big White Man and began to fidget with his hands. Lila saw a white blur moving around. A bloodied napkin transferred between left and right palm,

rubbing up and down against Green Striped Shirt's brown tinted skin. Streaks of red stained the white square and Lila looked to Josh, to make sure he was seeing it too. When she saw his wide eyes, she thought about how she had never experienced fight or flight, but somewhere deep in her bones, she knew her ancestors did. The napkin dropped to the floor, and Lila leaned into Josh. In some primal part of both their beings, they knew the show had just begun.

Green Striped Shirt popped up from his seat, and Lila leaned back, as if to combat his presence. He flashed to their side of the car, towards the man listening to headphones diagonal from him. All Lila and Josh could see was a combination of green and white, a flurry of body on body, pressure and pain.

"Get off me!" the man with the headphones shouted. "Get off!"

Green Striped Shirt was pressed against Music Man like Velcro. Music Man pushed Green Striped Shirt off him with fabulous force. The man with the bloody hands tried again, pressing his body down, mumbling indistinct words and hunching over. Josh's arms covered Lila's front, as if they were driving in a car and Josh had just slammed on the brakes. Nearly everyone in the car was on his or her feet; the mother was shielding her children, and the friends cowered together in the far corner. Josh moved to stand, too, looking between the desperate commotion, and his shaking wife. His eyes were frantic; he looked how Lila felt.

Green Striped Shirt pinballed from Music Man, propped against the window, to the man directly across from Lila and Josh, the one he had followed in too closely just moments before. He jumped the broad man, pushing all his weight down on the seated fellow, positioning himself like a baby straddling its mother. Again, shouts of frustration escaped into the surrounding air, and everyone looked around, panic pulsing from stranger to stranger.



Big White Man pushed Green Striped Shirt away, with massive, brute force, and the lovers watched as the man hung suspended between them, all of them, centered in the circle of onlookers, Subway-riding civilians who never asked for any of this. Green Striped Shirt spun around and around, his body like the hand of a clock, spinning through minutes. Lila saw the imprint of a knife that had found a comfortable home in the man's pocket. She reached for Josh, and he reached back. They needed to get off this car.

In the midst of confusion, the subway had moved a stop, and was beginning to slow again. Green Striped Shirt stayed in the middle of the circle as the subway car screeched. With slow steps, the loose circle began to unfold, and the mother and her children backpedaled to safety towards the back of the car. Meanwhile, three men, including Josh Boon, made the effort to get Green Striped Shirt off the subway and onto the platform of 161<sup>st</sup> Street, near Yankee Stadium. Without speaking, they formed a line and collectively stepped toward him, pushing him towards the gap between car and concrete. Josh stood in the middle, Big White Man to his left, and Music Man to his right. Lila stood against the far-right wall of the car, and watched as her husband and the strangers moved Green Striped Shirt back without force. She marveled at their collective effort, and at their shared choice that seemed to communicate between them through the flow of testosterone and adrenaline. While the circle disbanded, Josh had pushed Lila to one side, and flashed her a warning look. She trusted his eyes, and stayed silent as he took his first step towards Green Striped Shirt. The other two men followed in line as though they were backing up their lifelong friend in a pickup fight. Lila watched as they managed to move him out of the car and onto the platform, and then as they lined the sliding double-door entrance like a King's Guard, standing shoulder to shoulder to fight off the threat. She watched, as though living, breathing wallpaper, out the grimy window as Green Striped Shirt stood still on the

platform, his shoulders heaving and his eyes shifting. He looked at his opposition and took a daring step, then another, before he was running full force towards the wall of human flesh. Josh, the center of defense, reached for the striped collar, and with the help of Big White Man, the two heaved the man and his shirt off the concrete slab by the material near his neck. They flung him down, threw him away like it was garbage day, and he flailed far through the air, nearly reaching the back wall of the platform. The entire car watched as Green Striped Shirt stood up, brushed off his trousers, shook his head in two quick motions, and took one, two, three running steps, until it was happening all over again. The men picked up him for a second time, this time with Music Man's help, and tossed him like a football through the stifling summer air. Lila had never seen such a spectacle before, but she remembered reading about "crack strength" in medical school, a term for when people in the midst of an inebriated crack cocaine high, short but intense, experience superhuman power. For a moment, she let herself believe she was front row for an action movie, and she thought about how much toxicity was flowing through the man's body at the very moment she was a fly on the wall.

On the third attempt at entrance, Green Striped Shirt pushed his way back in through the King's Guard, brandishing the once-concealed pocketknife. The men moved apart to avoid the sharp blade, which he held in front of his chest like a shield. Josh motioned for Lila, his head moving between her face and the platform as if he were watching a tennis match. She moved next to him and reached for his palm, which was slick with sweat. She tugged down on his arm to get his attention, as the mother of three began to shout. Green Striped Shirt was moving towards the woman and her family with slow, specific steps.

"We need to get him to the next stop. There will be police there," she yelled. "He has a knife, and I have kids!" Lila stood just behind her husband, and looked over his shoulder as she

held her arms around his waist. Josh was her real-life shield, a barrier between her and Green Striped Shirt. The menace was still holding a knife, and was back in the center of the onlookers, like a street performer. He circled around and around, the knife and his shifting eyes the two constants of the moment, and his sneer exposed decaying teeth. He began to lunge forward, yielding the knife loosely, inches away from the onlookers. Josh stepped back, pressed against Lila to the point where she could no longer see, and the subway began to move again, slowly, as if God himself had heard the distraught mother's cries and decided on divine intervention. The man turned his back on the rest of the car, and allowed his roaming eyes to stop, finally, directly on Josh Boon's own. It was then that Josh realized a number of things.

The first thing he realized was it was very likely that in that moment, the attacker didn't even know his own name. His eyes, Josh saw, were vacant, without recognition, like those of a patient in a coma. He realized the man was ill, sick to the point he couldn't possibly know what he was doing. He realized the man was alone, realized that even though he had terrorized a car full of innocent people, he was starkly alone. And, finally, almost as an afterthought, Josh Boon realized he had been stabbed, because Green Striped Shirt's eyes had lost the lock on his, and were staring at the pool of red that had begun to collect under Josh's feet.

Lila Boon, however, was already shrieking, her hands red with her husband's blood. The stab wounds had been inflicted on Josh's left arm and ribcage, inches above her own left arm, and as Josh had pressed against her to shield her, she began to feel his weight grow gradually heavier. On instinct, she reached for his wrist, to check his pulse. When she withdrew her hands, they were sticky with hot liquid, and she felt hysterical.

In all the confusion, in the sprinting and jumping and circling and knife yielding, Josh had been stabbed three times. Two of the wounds, Lila assessed, were non-threatening, but the

third, the deepest, had punctured an artery, or maybe his spleen, and Josh was rapidly losing blood. The color in his face began to drain, and he felt his knees grow weak. Lila shrieked again, as the car began to slow. Police officers were already on the platform, and Lila thought that someone, likely the mother, had called 911 when the car had been last stopped. Josh collapsed as the car stopped altogether, and Lila crumbled awkwardly under and beside him, his body weight dragging her down. She sat in her husband's blood and moved to put his head on her lap, speaking slowly and softly.

“Everything's going to be okay, Joshy. I know it doesn't feel like it right now, but everything is going to be okay. I promise. You just have to hang on for me, baby. You have to stay here with me.”

Lila looked into the face of the man she loved, the man she had loved for years. She looked at him like she was looking at him for both the first and the last time; she tried to take a mental picture, to have something to hold on, a memorization, a moment that she would return to for years to come. She tried to ignore the red that was seeping into the middle of the car, tried to ignore the horror of the moment that was becoming all too real. Two police officers dragged Green Striped Shirt away in cuffs. A third officer dropped down on his knees in front of the Boons.

“There's an ambulance on the way, ma'am.”

Lila told the officer that both she and her husband were doctors, and requested he be taken to Mount Sinai. It took an hour for the paramedics to arrive, and when Lila finally saw a gurney being rolled onto the platform through the subway car's windows, she allowed herself to close her eyes, just for a moment. Her husband's pulse was faint, weakened, and the thin scarf-turned-bandage Lila had taken from her neck and pressed into the deepest wound was entirely

wet. Lila rode in the ambulance with an unconscious Josh, silently crying the whole way. They drove away from a closed Subway stop somewhere between The Bronx and Manhattan, and spent another hour in stop-and-go city traffic. By the time they reached the hospital, they had revived Josh not once, but twice.

A spleenless Josh Boon died from an infection post-surgery a week after his stabbing. Two weeks after that, Lila Boon missed her period. A month and a half after losing her husband, Lila scheduled an appointment with her gynecologist, and four months after losing her husband, as she settled herself onto the hospital bed and pulled her shirt up above her abdomen, she thought of Josh. She thought of the night they had planned out their future.

It was late, around eleven, and Josh returned home a few hours after Lila had settled in for the night. He unlocked the door to their apartment, and before she saw her then-fiancé, Lila saw a bouquet of hydrangeas, and a plastic drugstore bag. Josh placed the bag, filled with a bottle of their favorite red wine, Sharpies, and construction paper gently on the side table, as well as the flowers, before wrapping her up in an extensive hug. She hung her arms around his neck and stood on her tippy toes to kiss his lips. She felt her future husband smile into her kiss, and she couldn't help smiling back.

"I brought you something," Josh said.

"The flowers are beautiful," replied Lila, her smile reaching her eyes, and sucking the oxygen from the inside of Josh's lungs. He felt his breath catch in his throat, and for a moment, he thought he might cry.

"You're picking your concentration in a few weeks, and I know you've been feeling anxious... so, I thought we could sketch out what we want our life to look like, and go from there."

He ripped open the plastic covering the construction paper, filled two wine glasses to the brim, and motioned for Lila to join him on the floor. He spread out the pages, forming a semi-circle around them, and popped the lid off a permanent marker.

“It’s something I did when choosing my specialty,” he told her as he brought the red wine to his lips, “but I only used a few pieces of printer paper. I wanted to get us something a little sturdier.”

Lila looked at Josh and felt something bubble up inside her, a mixture of infatuation, adoration, and deep, fulfilling, wholesome longing; she thought she may feel this way for the rest of her life.

When the bottle was long gone and the papers were sketched, the lovers found themselves drunk in love and high on possibilities. For their first wedding anniversary, Josh had the fourteen pieces of taped, multicolor paper framed, with dried hydrangeas bordering the sheets. *To my wife, on our first of many anniversaries. Each day, now, forever,* read the inscription on the platinum plaque at the bottom of the frame.

Lila looked at the stark white walls of her doctor’s office, and jumped from her reverie when the door opened. The gynecologist who entered was her friend, an associate she had gotten close with over the years, who had brought her homemade chicken noodle soup in the week after Josh’s passing. She looked at Lila with deep, sad eyes, as she reached for the clear gel and fired up the monitor.

“This may be a little cold, Lila,” said her friend, before squeezing the gel on Lila’s belly that had, within the last week, begun to protrude, ever so slightly. The OB/GYN moved the gel around with an instrument in her right hand, and the monitor showed a screen of darkness, filled with faint lines that may have traced the beginnings of a body, and a beating that resembled a

pulse near the right side of Lila's abdomen. Lila looked at the pounding part of the screen, and felt tears leave her eyes before she even registered they were there. The doctor handed Lila a box of tissues as her emotions escaped in clipped, sharp yelps. Lila squeezed her friend's hand with a grip tight enough to stop blood flow.

"Everything looks good, Lila," said her friend. "You have a healthy little thing in there, about the size of a peach."

Lila looked down, and back at the monitor. She opened her mouth as if to speak, but air escaped in the place words would have been. She squeezed her eyes closed, and reopened them.

"I can tell you the sex, if that's something you'd like to know."

Lila shook her head, her lips turned down in a visible whimper.

"You don't have to," Lila whispered. "I can feel it already. It's our boy."

## II

### Paris

I'm looking down at my fingers as I sit on the metro. My hands are long and thin; I remember growing up thinking they were beautiful, though they don't look that way now. My nails are painted a glossy black, and my fingers beat against my legs in time with the music playing through my headphones. Today, it's Maurice Ravel's *Pavane pour une infant défunte*, *M.19* that I mime through the air. I can feel Ravel's heart beating in my own as I close my eyes, my fingers pressing through time and space to play on the nonexistent piano placed in front of me. I open them again when the metro car slows. I'll be home in six stops, and until then, I will return to the story that replays on loop in my head. I notice the rips and tears in the cuticle around each of my fingers, and I resist the primal temptation to reach for a shard and rip up, away from the rest of the skin, before I drop it on the ground and leave a little piece of me here, on this Paris metro. Instead, I squeeze my eyes shut and pretend like I can see the music notes in my headspace like I'm looking at them on a sheet.

The first time I met Dr. LeFrau, I'd never picked a day in my life. He was a friend of my father's, from the moment their mothers met when the boys were ten years old. They spent every year together and even decided on university together, leaving the country with their belongings and best friend. Once they finished with university in London, two young men from Normandy made a home for themselves in Paris during their prime.

When I was a teenager, Mama had just acquired the gallery, and spent her weekends cultivating the fresh space of the medium-sized building into an extravagant display. She'd leave me with Papa for most of Saturday and Sunday afternoons, and I would run circles around my



poet father, begging him to put down his pipe and whatever poetry book he was reading to pay attention to his thirteen-year-old daughter. After my whiny whimpers infiltrated the quiet he had worked to achieve, he would sigh, place a bookmark to save his page, and set the book down on the table in front of him, or in his lap. With his pipe hanging loosely from the left corner of his mouth, he'd smile at me, and ask, "What would you like to do today, *mon chérie*?"

Sometimes we'd go for ice cream, and sometimes we'd go to a museum. Occasionally, we'd surprise Mama at her new gallery, and she'd shoo us out, saying, "It's not ready! It's not ready!" On sunny Parisian days, we picnicked in front of the Eiffel Tower, and on days where rain fell torrentially from the sky, we'd sit in our home, cuddled in blankets, the smoke from his pipe swirling above our heads like wisps of frozen breath. No matter where we were, whether rain or shine, at some point in the day, I'd ask for a story, and no matter where we were, or what the weather, the story would somehow include my father's childhood best friend, Jacques.

The one I could recite myself was about the night Papa and Jacques had acquired their matching tobacco pipes. On the last day of their penultimate university year the friends were sitting in a café, celebrating the end of their studies for the summer, dragging cigarettes from fingers to lip and sipping from espresso cups. A girl approached them, looking to be a few years older than Papa and his friend, and invited them to a party at her apartment later that night. The story, which seemed innocent enough when Papa told it to a younger me all those years ago, told of a rowdy night of card-playing (gambling), dancing (gyrating on the dance floor), and rock and roll (sex, drugs, inebriated youth). It all floated right over my head like the very smoke from his prized pipe. When Papa and Jacques left the party in the bright light of a new day, they had acquired the phone numbers of five women between the two of them (though Jacques was responsible for four of those numbers), and two pipes won in a game of Belote. Papa's moral of

the story was to be safe, but be spontaneous. “Life will take you where you most need to go, if you just let it,” Papa would say. “But make sure that when you’re off on the journey, you’re of-age. You have years ahead of you before you have to worry. Now, ice cream?”

Late in his twenties, my father met my mother. Dr. LeFrau thought that if his best friend could find love, he could too. The doctor’s version of a relationship, however, centered on his work and hours upon hours of time spent in oncological laboratories. Jacques moved to America during Mama’s pregnancy and took a professor’s position at an esteemed university in California. I knew him from my father’s boyhood photographs as the dark-haired best friend, the stories I heard about the revelry of Papa’s youth, and the identical tobacco pipe that matched my father’s, which he left before his move.

The night we met, the night that changed everything, began as an entirely predictable day. I had agreed to meet my parents for dinner at one of our favorite cafés near my apartment in Montmartre. I was attending my final year at Paris Sciences et Lettres studying music theory and composition, and living with my best friend, Juliette. My parents were in my neighborhood, something to do with Mama’s gallery and a prospective exhibit from an acclaimed artist. Their invitation meant one thing for Juliette and me, and it had to do entirely with copious amounts of champagne, butter, baguettes, and cigarettes. My roommate and I left our apartment at 7:30 PM, strolling hand in hand through the City of Love. When the maître d’ showed us to our table, Mama, Papa, and Dr. LeFrau were seated and on their second glass of champagne. To meet, see, and hear a man I had only imagined was fantastic. There were so many things I wanted to ask him, so many things I wanted to know. What were my parents like, before they were parents? Was Papa a ladies’ man, like he liked to claim he was? What was the world like, my world like, before I came around?

I can still hear Papa's voice boom over the music being pumped into the serving room from seated musicians in the corner.

"Juliette, please allow me to introduce my dear friend, Dr. Jacques LeFrau." My father gestured to the man sitting at our table in a slim fitting suit with an air of authority and the most exquisite sense of self. Jacques stood up from the table, and my father's eyes watched his movements as he introduced himself first to Juliette, and then me. Mama reached for Papa's hand and gave it a squeeze; I smiled at my parents and felt lucky to witness such love.

I watched as my best friend looked at our dinner guest and extended her hand. Juliette had been beautiful since we were girls, with long, bouncing curls that fell over her shoulders and down her back in cascades of auburn spirals. Her full, round lips painted a pearly pink curled into a wide smile.

"Enchanté, monsieur," said Juliette.

"Call me Jacques, s'il vous plaît."

Having known Juliette for a lifetime, I was keen to the way her pupils dilated as she stared into Dr. LeFrau's face. He was, in her defense, a beautiful man. Tall, with massively broad shoulders and hands that looked like they could move mountains. His eyes were quick, smart, intuitive, and deeply blue. His cheeks were covered with the beginning stages of what would be a well-developed beard in the coming weeks, and the air around him seemed to glow with palpable electricity. I realized it was not just Juliette or myself that was staring at the fifth member of our dinner party; women throughout the restaurant had positioned themselves so that they too could have a clear view of what they hoped may be dessert.

I introduced myself to Dr. LeFrau with shaky hands and a shakier voice.

“It’s an absolute pleasure to meet you,” he said to me as I took the seat to his right. “I’ve been hearing about you for more than twenty years. I thought it was time I came to meet you myself.”

“I’m so glad you’re here, Doctor. This is all rather surreal. I hope I do not disappoint.”

“With parents like yours, you’re bound to have one of the most beautiful and brilliant brains in all of France. I’m sure you are everything they claim you are and more.”

“Jacques, you’ll give the girl a big head,” said Mama. “She already thinks she’s too big for this world.”

“From what I’ve heard, she probably is.”

I remember the night through champagne-colored vignettes. I still think about the taste of garlic and butter seeping through the soft aerated holes of the cafés bread, and the smell of Dr. LeFrau’s cologne as it wafted from his profound jaw to my nose. I can hear the music playing from the band, three men with their string instruments and a woman in a long, crème dress, singing *La vie en rose*.

“She is no Edith, but she’ll do,” Jacques said, as the singer hit the final note and took a small bow.

I had closed my eyes, letting the concluding sounds vibrate through the air and land lightly on my stilling fingertips.

“There is no other Edith, but Edith herself. But, you’re right. She will do,” I answered, when she was finished.

I remember opening my eyes and seeing him staring. I remember the way his eyes sparkled, almost ignited with the same vital electricity that was buzzing around his head.

“You have fabulous taste,” he answered.

I remember all of it, and I remember so little. Mostly, I remember him, just him, in his entirety: the way he spoke with every ounce of confidence this mean world would ever give a stationed soul; the way his tongue rose and fell with the inclinations of his stories about math class with Papa, or a patient pushed near the brink of death before an incredible recovery; the way he had everyone on the edge of their seat, thirsting for more. I remember feeling like my lips hadn't touched an ounce of liquid in twenty-one years, and he was a pool of fresh ice water, crystal clear. I remember wondering if I could swim inside.

I remember realizing it was nearing midnight when Juliette began yawning. My parents, too, were exhausted, and after kisses on both cheeks and an extra one atop my head from Mama, who lingered near the table while Papa had already walked outside until I told her I'd call her when I got home, I remember looking around to see just him there, still sitting next to me. Juliette had departed twenty minutes prior to my parents, but Dr. LeFrau and I were too enthralled in a conversation about Derrida's early work for me to notice. After finishing our final bottle of sparkling wine, I told him it was okay if he had to go. To which he responded, "Dear girl, I have every moment in the universe." I remember the feeling that those words brought me. I remember believing, really, fundamentally believing, that the only two people to exist—now, then, forever—were us.

And then, I remember him at my door.

"If you liked the band that played today, you would love the show I plan to see tomorrow," he said, as he leaned against the massive archway leading into my apartment building. "Louise is a close friend of mine, and she's playing in Belleville-Menilmontant. She has the voice of an angel. Would you join me?"

“Well, if it was good enough for Edith herself to call home, I suppose it’ll host a good enough show. Shall I meet you there?”

“Au contraire. I will collect you prior to the show, in the evening.”

After a brisk kiss on one cheek, then the other, he was gone.

My index finger reached for the skin around my thumb and picked.

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I awoke the next day, as sunlight was peeking through my blinds and casting shadows about my room. Rolling over, I brought my hands to my face and rubbed, pushing the sleep from the bottom crease of my eyelids to the corner of my blinking eyes. My fingers felt hard against the skin of my cheek, and I looked at my shredded nail beds. Panic surged inside me, hot and sudden, as I examined my ravaged skin. My cuticles were nearly picked raw on the index finger on my left hand and the pinky on my right; I realized that all the while I had been getting ready for bed the night before, I had been picking the skin red around my fingers.

I had never done anything like this before. As a child, I realized I had the makings of a talented pianist, having been deemed a young savant by four different teachers from the ages of three to seventeen. My fingers had been everything to me then. I kept them in pristine condition, trimming my own cuticles and filing my nails with an obsessive eye to detail at least once a day. My fingernails were painted one of two colors back then, and switched between a pearly, opaque shade to an acutely soft pink. I had a habit of placing my hands in dish gloves filled with Vaseline and leaving them on for hours, removing them only when I was sure they were smooth as silk, when I was sure they’d be able to fly over the piano keys like they were greased. My relationship to the grand piano that sat in the foyer of my parent’s home was desperate, exquisite, and full. Mama claimed it was Papa’s doing, as he apparently insisted to play for my mother and

me once a day while she was pregnant. The only way I ever knew how to describe the fundamental draw I had to the music was to relate my heart to a piano itself; each time something significant happened in my life, I felt a melodious note, whether happy or sad, release from the instrument in the center of my chest. It pulled me apart, escaped, and placed me back together. And when I played, when I let the music flow from the most tainted depths of my being, my body elevated from its place in this mortal world and descended above itself. I became energy, only energy, flowing from my vessel to the piano to the whole world. And it was glorious.

Mortified by my actions, I reached for my filing tools. While my fingers moved to smooth down my rough skin, I looked at the intricate details of my two hurt fingers. Near the surface of my nail were divots, divides in the space where skin once grew. Broken and uneven, my cuticles looked like they belonged on the hands of someone nervous and incompetent, terrified and tired. Where had this urge come from? Why had I done something so irrational? While contemplating, I felt the sharp point of my nail reach for my cuticle again, this time on a third finger. Frustrated and full of panic, I stood up hastily and walked to my baby grand. Sitting on the bench and positioning my feet above the pedals, I took three deep breaths, just like Papa had taught me to do before any show. In through the nose, out through the mouth. In through the nose, out through the mouth. Pause. And for good measure, one last one. In through the nose, out through the mouth. I closed my eyes and felt my fingers stroke the keys. A small smile crept across my face and I could feel my spirit begin to lift, rise out of my body and settle in my favorite vantage point from the high ceiling. But as my fingers settled on the keys and I began to press, pain shot through my cracked skin, throbbing up my veins and pinching in the base of my arm. I pulled my fingers back from the keys like I had been burned, and I felt my throat begin to close. I had never been unable to play before; through the best and worst parts of my life, playing

was my core, my base, the essence of my being and the reason I survived each day, desperate or divine. If I didn't have the piano, did I even have myself?

I called Juliette and asked her to meet me at our regular café when she was off work. As I walked up to the small, outdoor table, Juliette was sucking on a cigarette and idly spinning her coffee cup. Her face blossomed with a classic Juliette smile when she saw me.

"Good afternoon, my dear friend," said Juliette.

"And a good afternoon to you as well, meilleure amie."

As the waiter brought over a coffee for me, I reached for Juliette's rolling papers and loose tobacco. I watched as Juliette's eyes grew large, and I knew she had seen.

"Alice!" she shrieked. "What on earth happened to your fingers?"

And so, I told her everything of the night before. I told her of how Jacques and I were not only the last of our dinner party to remain, but the last patrons in the restaurant at the end of the night. I told her of our walk home, of the few moments outside our apartment door where he looked at me and I swore I could feel every molecule of air escape from my lips out into the open world. I told her of our plans tonight, and I told her of my discovery this morning.

"I need help, Jules."

"Clearly. First, we must go get manicures. Your fingers look dreadful."

If there was one thing I could always count on Juliette for, it was honesty that was so full of good intention, the bite in each remark felt like a love tap rather than a puncture wound.

Day turned to night, and my sharp, jagged cuticles turned from cavernous gaps to softer skin again, though the redness and cracks remained. I anticipated my night with Jacques with ludicrous immaturity, like I was being fetched for a night out in Le Marais with my high school boyfriend, Pierre. Juliette watched as I changed my outfit not once but thrice, throwing flowing



dresses and patterned pants around my room as she flipped through glossy magazine pages and smoked cigarettes in my bed. I didn't know how to dress for the evening ahead. Jacques couldn't possibly be categorizing this as a date; we had only met once, and, as if I could ever forget, he was an old family friend, a pal of Papa's. But, when it had been just the two of us in that restaurant, just the two of us leaning against the brick of my building before we said goodnight, I wasn't so sure we weren't already in love. There was no possibility of the night being categorized as a date, and so I dressed for the most romantic evening of my life anyways. In a small black skirt, black and white checkered top, and chunky red heels, I stepped in front of the mirror ten minutes before Jacques was due to arrive. Scrutinizing myself with hooded eyes, I took in my appearance as I hoped Jacques would – confident, young, full of tenacity and the lifeblood of the world.

“Alice, relax. You can't possibly tell all that from your outfit alone, darling. Let him get to know you. Then he'll see.”

The buzzer rang from the hallway, and I grabbed my purse. After a kiss on both cheeks, I took the steps down two at a time and stopped with my hand on the doorknob to the outside world.

In through the nose, out through the mouth. Pause. In through the nose, out through the mouth. Pick.

The night air was warm, with a breeze rattling between tree branches, scattering loose leaves around our feet. It was typical weather for early September in Paris, with the sun shining blindly during the day and hiding masterfully behind thick clouds at night.

“Bonsoir, mademoiselle. Ça va?”

“Ça va très bien, monsieur. Et vous?”

Jacques smiled at me with a gravity-defying grin that tugged on the most delicate of my heartstrings. My fingers reached for each other, and I balled my hand into a fist.

“It’s a lovely evening to enjoy an evening, don’t you think?” he asked me, his eyes alight with the glow of hanging streetlights.

“I have high hopes, you know,” I countered.

“Do you mind walking?”

“Not even a little.”

We walked silently at first, side by side, until I felt the butterflies in my stomach begin to do summersaults, those sly acrobats. I knew I was about to either laugh or release bile from my mouth, so I chose the first, less vile option. A laugh flowed out of the center of my heart like the first notes in *Suite bergamasque*. He turned his head towards me and giggled back, which only made me laugh more. It was one of those moments where I felt the piano centered in my chest cavity absolutely surge with the power of music and life and the sense of possibility, the heartbeat that pulsed within our evening. Behind Jacques, on the outskirts of my vision, couples walked past us, a blurry haze of cigarette smoke and painted lips. I smiled my best smile and shook my head as he paused and placed us before an unassuming door.

“Mon Alice, are you ready?”

With big eyes and a bigger smile, I nodded my head.

“Well then, here we are.”

Jacques opened the door and I followed in behind him. Plastered on the walls were photographs of past performers, and a neon sign with the name La Bellevilloise shining through LED lights. Before I could ask any questions, he took my left hand with its miniscule daggers of cuticles in his, and pulled me through the small hallway onto a massive platform that overlooked

a grand room below. There on the floor were lounge chairs and low tables, placed among twenty or so olive trees planted in round pots throughout the room. Gardenias and white buds hung down from the trees, intertwined with twinkling lights strung on the perimeter of the space. At one end of the room sat a stage with a grand piano placed neatly in the center, and an array of stage lights positioned on top held contrast to the low-hanging bulbs that cast a glow around the space. The butterflies in my stomach began swirling again, and I felt my breath catch in my throat as I spun around. Watching me take it all in was Jacques, his body silhouetted against the red brick behind him, his smile nearly as massive as the music club itself.

“This is one of my favorite spots on planet Earth,” he told me.

“It reminds me of you. Beautiful and magical.”

He looked at me, but I couldn’t read the expression on his face.

“Shall we get a drink?”

The room was still empty, and I couldn’t peel my eyes away from the piano, sitting there in all her glory. My teeth bit down on my bottom lip and I felt the telltale signs of an out-of-body experience begin; my hands trembled, my throat closed, and it was like I could feel my soul start to vibrate and pull up, higher and higher. This time, just like every other time I got close enough to play, had my body producing visceral reactions. I wasn’t sure if it was my imagination or if I could really feel my cerebrospinal fluid heat up around my pituitary gland – whatever it was, it was tangible, and the space around me vibrated until I was two steps away from the piano, a step away, then sitting on the black bench. The room, Jacques, all the massive olive trees planted around the space, melted away. I was alone with the piano and we were all that mattered. My soul was smiling, and my hands felt for the keys. My heart burst open and music flowed.

From my viewpoint on the ceiling, I saw my body shift one way and another as my hands flew over the black and white ivory, and the room filled with a deep lavender hue that exuded from my seated spot. As the notes began to slow, I descended and landed comfortably back in my shell, feeling the taut skin mold to my presence once again. I opened my eyes, unaware I had them closed, and found Jacques just a few feet away, his mouth agape and his eyes on fire. While I was playing, he had moved from the perimeter of the room and towards me and the music.

“Alice,” he began, “that was something extraordinary.”

I blushed and looked down at my hands; my cuticles were red and throbbing, and my skin itself was hot. Terrified, I moved my hands away from the keys and down towards my sides. My fingers had never hurt before from playing. In fact, my knuckles would ache with the thought of touching the keys if I went more than a few days without a piano. For the first time, however, playing had caused me equal pleasure and pain, and it made my heart race.

“I’m sorry, I should’ve asked if it was alright for me to play. I didn’t stop to think. It was foolish.”

“It was glorious,” Jacques replied. “Absolutely glorious. And I will not hear another apology out of you again, not for something so exquisite.”

I remember feeling distinctly special in that moment, and for the remainder of the evening. We ordered drinks and returned to a fuller room, couples milling about and socializing before taking their seats when the lights went dark. Jacques and I drank two bottles of wine and started dancing after the first one, watching and listening to his friend play stunning music from the stage. We walked home hand in hand that night, through the lit streets of Paris. He stopped me outside my apartment and leaned to kiss me once on both cheeks, to bid me adieu. I looked up at him when he got closer and shifted my weight up and through. With liquid courage surging

through my body, I moved both hands behind his neck and pulled his lips down to mine. After a moment of chaste touch, his hands moved from his sides to the small of my back, lifting me higher and forward, until he was supporting my body and giving me oxygen, passing fragments of the world through and into me, all at once. Breathless, I took him inside. We climbed the stairs, one by one, and I woke up with him on my right, his face the essence of peace and beauty, and two thin bloodstains on my sheets from the deep cuts I had forged with my nails on the skin around my fingers before I had fallen asleep.

Weeks later, Jacques and I were seeing each other nearly every night. He would leave me letters at my apartment and voicemails, each with an elaborate plan for a meal or a night of dancing or a show. Once or twice, he arrived at my doorstep with a fist full of flowers and the sweet temptation of a night in. He was a fabulous cook and we made intricate meals; he called me his sous chef and his kisses tasted like salt and butter when I pressed his body against the kitchen counter. Juliette would spend some time with us, when she wasn't working or with her own boyfriend. Once, we double dated, but the waiter asked if Jacques was Juliette's father and the night ended with strained silence and too much awkward tension to put another dinner on the books.

My reality became my life with Jacques. Our time together felt so full; whether we were eating or drinking or talking or laughing or loving. We used each and every millisecond to its greatest extent. We drove to the south of France and sipped wine in Nice. We took the Chunnel to London for a weekend and didn't leave our hotel room for more than three hours at a time. I saw my parents every few weeks and wouldn't even utter his name; Papa had been able to tell when I was lying from the age of five. They thought I was seeing someone, and kept asking to meet the young man, but I made excuses for months and set up more dinner dates to distract

them. Once, when I was feeling bold, I asked Jacques if he'd come with me to dinner to tell my parents of our status. That afternoon, he was called away suddenly to Cannes to fill in as a keynote speaker for a conference. He sent a divine gold bracelet as an apology, and a note that read "Forgive me for my absence. There is no where else I'd rather be than right next to you."

I didn't want to hide the truth, but I didn't want to share him. Jacques had become mine, in body, mind, and soul, and whatever Papa knew of him was only what Jacques had chosen to share – I knew who he really was, beyond just my father's friend. He was brilliant, with a brain that rivaled even Papa's. He was kind, with massive, delicate hands that held me as my skin vibrated against his. He was empathetic and worldly and the last six months we had spent together had given me day after day and night after night of passionate, Earth shattering, life changing love. I knew the way he smiled for everyone else, white teeth and a soft gaze, and I knew the way he smiled for me. When it was the two of us, I saw him at his core, and I loved it all. So we hid from my parents and the scrutiny of the world. We lived in our own, instead.

Our universe was massive then. We talked about our life together after graduation; Jacques had been offered another teaching position in America, and we decided he'd defer the offer for six months, until I could go with him. Nothing excited me more than the prospect of creating my life around him. I had wanted to move to America since I was a little girl watching television in a foreign language and flipping through glossy magazines with tall women on busy streets and skyscrapers in the background. France was home, but America was opportunity. And with Jacques, I could be happy anywhere. He was cooking me dinner the night he first brought it up.

"You finish school soon," he said, with the smile he saved just for me.

"Yes."

“And do you have any grand plans for your life after?”

“You know what my plan is.”

“I know what you plan on your life looking like, of course. That is not what I asked. I asked, do you have any grand plans for your life after graduation?”

My grand plan centered around Paris, a job perhaps teaching music or composing my own, and a massive piano in whatever home I lived in. I told him as much.

“Would you ever live in America?”

“If the opportunity presented itself in a few years, maybe.”

“And what if the opportunity was to present itself now?”

I looked up from the cutting board that was scattered with cut vegetables. I set the knife down and moved to him, leaning my front to his back as he stirred the beginnings of a sauce on the stove. He put down the spoon and spun to face me.

“I’ve been offered a teaching position in the medical school at Columbia University. I know you’ve always wanted to go. I’d very much like if you’d come with me after you finish your studies.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“But I am, mon amour. More serious than I have ever been.”

That was all it took for me to see myself in Manhattan; I pictured myself walking around the big streets from the magazine, reading books in Central Park and thumbing fabric in vintage clothing stores. I saw myself coming home to my brilliant lover after a cool fall day, to tangle myself up in his limbs in the way I’d come to crave, and in my heart, it was set. I would follow him to the ends of the Earth if it meant I could see my smile creeping on his lips.

“If this is real,” I said, “if we are to really go, we must tell Mama and Papa. And soon.”

“Alice, please sit.” He gestured to the round table off of the kitchen. “I’ve been thinking of the right way to tell your parents. You understand this is a rather complex position to be in, do you not? I don’t want to overstep or under explain.”

“If you tell them how much you love me, I know they’ll understand. It may be difficult at first, but they will learn to accept our happiness. I know them. They will.”

“You are right, I know. And I will tell them. But it must be the right time. Do you understand?”

“Of course.” And I did. Our love was complex; the age difference was one thing on its own, and his relation to my family was another entirely. He always told me that it didn’t matter what the outside world thought. The only thing that ever mattered was us.

“Perhaps I should tell Mama,” I offered. “She has always been the more rational of the two.”

“I’d rather you not, mon amour. Allow me a few more weeks to finalize my delivery. Then, we shall tell them together.”

Three months passed from the night we first planned our move to my father’s birthday celebration. I was beginning to see the finish line that came with my studies, and my fingers had taken to a constant state of raw throbbing that I had become numb to. I walked through life thinking of Jacques and ignoring the layers of exposed skin that I had forged throughout our love affair.

I had helped Mama plan Papa’s evening. We worked to make his party a night he could never forget. Juliette had booked the venue, Mama made the arrangements for the food, and I was to entertain. I curated a list of Papa’s favorite songs, and rehearsed for weeks, through the pain of tender fingers. My finale was a song I had written for him myself.



I arrived at the restaurant early in high heels Jacques had bought me. *For mon amour, and the streets of New York*, the note atop the box had read. Black patent leather with red soles, the shoes were nearly as beautiful as the piano he had shown me, the one he planned to order for our new apartment in America. “For you,” he had said.

I greeted Mama as she set up the room and helped her hang photos and balloons. Just as I made my way to the piano to warm up before our guests arrived, Jacques walked in. His smile told me he was not there for me. My index finger reached for my thumb, ready to pick. Glancing down at my hands, I took in the state of my cuticles. On all ten fingers, the skin around my nail was bright red and cavernous, with layers carved out. Frayed pieces of skin jutted in each direction, and I brought my thumb to my mouth. My habit had evolved over nine months, and was so slick and sly, I rarely recognized when I was picking.

“Jacques, you’re early!” I watched as my mother embraced the man I loved, kissing him delicately on both cheeks.

“I admit my punctuality is clouded with ulterior motive,” he said. “Alice, may I speak with you?”

There was something in his voice that sounded off; I tried to catch his eye, but they looked void of all emotion. I stood up quickly and made my way towards him.

“Back here,” I said, and motioned towards the hallway outside the event room. I could feel Mama’s eyes on us as we left the room. I had told her I’d been seeing someone recently, but when she pressed for details, I redirected the conversation. The previous interaction revealed the truth.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Alice, I can’t tell your father about us.”

“Of course you can. I know you’re nervous. I am too. But they will understand. We’re to leave in three months. I need them to know.”

“It’s time I tell you something, mon amour.”

“What is it, Jacques? What is going on?”

He took my hands in his and I flinched. My fingers burned from the pain of picking, relentlessly, over the last few weeks. Anticipation over graduating and revealing my secret to two of the most important in my life had me on edge; Juliette told me she hadn’t seen me so happy and overwhelmed at the same time since we were in middle school waiting for our favorite boy band to release their newest album. Panic flew across Jacques’s face as I pulled my hands away from his. I began sweating, and I recognized the symptoms of flight or fight. With my body frozen, my soul began to pull up and away, this time out of fear rather than pure ecstasy. I wasn’t even in the room for my conversation with Jacques – I was comfortably sprawled atop the acrylic hood of the piano in the party room, humming soul tunes.

“I don’t know how to tell you this, which puts me in a rather unfortunate position,” he started. “I’ve always only been honest with you, or at least I have tried to be. We now come to a point where in order for that statement to remain true, I must reveal some surprising news from my past.

“When your father and I were young men, we did nearly everything together. As you know, we were friends from the age of ten, and we very much felt as though we were inseparable. When he got a good mark on exams, I felt as though I did, too. When my mother tragically passed my last year of school, Papa was my shoulder to cry on. When we were about twenty-five, after two or three years of living in Paris, we talked of moving to America together. We were set on the idea, until about a year later, when I fell in love.

“She was glorious – the epitome of beauty and intelligence, with a deep aptitude for understanding and sympathy. I had met her at a coffee shop on a sunny Saturday afternoon, and we spent much time together from that point forward for a handful of months. When I knew I really loved her, I decided to introduce her to your father, knowing there would be no possibility of a life with her without his approval.

“The night I introduced them was the night I have replayed every day for the last twenty-three years. We were at a local bar your father and I often went to, and I invited her to join us for a drink one evening. She came in, and I swear I could see her aura. The deepest purple hue I’d ever seen resonated around her, and when she sat down, I smelled lavender. I looked up to greet her, but before I could even say hello, she and your father had established something chemical and visceral, almost palpable, between them. They only had eyes for each other. As an outsider, I had melted away into the ambience of the bar. I felt awkward and quite sad, so I left. The next day, your father came over and apologized to me, saying he had no idea what had come over him. Even though that was true, and I would never call your father a liar, I knew exactly what had happened. I had never believed in love at first sight, but your parents changed my mind.”

“It was Mama?”

Jacques sadness was as tangible as he said my parents’ love had been. His body looked deflated, and his eyes were shifted towards the ground. My heart carried so much all at once – the ferocity of anger, the ache of loss, the depth of sorrow. I was equal parts confused and repulsed, my fingers flying and picking, stabbing, prodding.

“I don’t understand. Mama?”

“Yes, unfortunately. Mama. And so I left. Moved to America a few months later, left the closest thing I had ever had to a brother, so that I would no longer love the woman he loved. It took some time, of course, but I moved on. Time heals all wounds, mon amour.”

“It seems everyone in my family is your love.”

“Alice, do you now understand why I hesitated to tell you? Looking back, of course it was silly. While I did care deeply for your mother, it doesn’t come close to the inexplicable affection I hold for you. You are my future – this, I know.”

“I don’t know what to say, Jacques.”

“Say you believe me, and you love me, too. Now that all is out in the open, we can move forward. To America, to a life together.”

“And what will we tell Mama and Papa? That you’ve fallen in love with the daughter of the woman you loved when you were a younger man? How do you think that will go?”

“I never said it would be easy, Alice. I just said we could move forward.”

I looked at the man I had idolized for nearly a year. Months of life spent together, boiled down to a single moment. I needed to leave.

“I have to go. I have to play.”

I left Jacques standing in the room and moved towards the crowd collected in the venue. As if in a daze, I walked to the piano. I could’ve been dreaming or half-dead, but I sat on the bench and placed my hands on the keys.

“Happy Birthday, Papa,” I said into the microphone. “These songs are for you.”

I closed my eyes and let my soul escape through a held-in sigh. As I floated, I noticed my bright red hands flying over the ivory, as if painted by an amateur. Blood droplets collected in pools at the base of each nail as my ten fingers as they slipped on the keys, and small red stains

flung on my dress as I turned into a Jackson Pollock painting. My hands ached and the blood left in my extremities pounded against my skin. One by one, the six songs I had prepared bellowed their melodious tunes through the party, and one by one, my fingers complied with the music. It was only on the last song, the one I had written just for Papa, that my hands stopped working. Cramped and dripping, my claws moved from the piano and my soul slammed down into its vessel. I stood up and ran from the room, to a chorus of confused applause. Juliette ran after me, and she held me in the streets of Paris as I shrieked and cursed the universe I had come to love. We went home hand in hand that night, her skin slick with my blood.

Jacques called me fourteen times the night of the party, but I wouldn't answer. There was nothing to say. When he described his love for Mama, each thing he had told me over the months we were together evaporated into white noise, the equivalent of elevator music. Jacques' honesty felt like a betrayal of biblical proportions. I told Mama and Papa everything over breakfast the morning after, and apologized for leaving in such haste.

"I know I owe you an explanation," I began, "so here goes." I told them about how it had started, and about how real it was. I told them I had planned to move with him. I told them I was devastated, that the piano in my heart was broken and desperately out of tune.

Papa was angry while Mama was quiet. I watched as my father's face darkened with each detail I revealed. I ended by telling them of our conversation just moments before Papa's party. When I turned quiet, I couldn't remember the last time I had seen Papa so upset.

"The man is a liar. After all this time... after repaired trust that took so many years... We should have never gone to dinner that night."

My parents and I sat in the backyard of my childhood home. Papa stood from the table hastily, and left Mama and I in silence outside.

“Your father is a brilliant man, but he is not always so good with his words. He will have more to say when he calms down.”

“I didn’t mean to upset either of you, Mama.”

“Oh, Alice, you’ve done nothing wrong.”

I looked down at my hands and thought about just how wrong she was.

“We wondered why we hadn’t seen him very much over the last year, but Jacques has always marched to the beat of his own drum. We just figured he was out chasing girls... we didn’t know he was out chasing our girl.

“There are things you should know about Jacques, Alice. He only likes to share with others what he is most proud of in himself. You obviously know he is charming and highly educated... but I wonder if you ever saw a side of him that left you feeling cold. When I fell in love with your father, I had only known Jacques for a month or two. He was handsome and intriguing, but I was never in love with him. In fact, when he introduced me to your father, I had been honest with him and told him I wasn’t quite there with him yet. He had told me he was in love with me after knowing me for a week. I knew it wasn’t love... It was just Jacques.

“For about a month after your father and I moved in together, Jacques would show up unannounced, during random hours of the day and night. Sometimes he’d be so full of sorrow that your father would invite him in and let him cry on our couch for hours. Sometimes, he was angry, and would yell insults at us from outside. The abuse felt constant, and your father eventually told Jacques he was no longer welcome to visit us. Jacques responded poorly... he left for America two weeks later.

“When we saw him again, a few years after he had moved when he came back for holiday, he took your father and me out to dinner and apologized profusely. We forgave him, of

course; your father loves the man like his own brother. But ever since, I have been aware of a Jacques that is not as beautiful as the man he tries to be.”

My mother was deeply, wholeheartedly sorry, for not warning me, for not being more aware. “I would’ve never let this happen, had I known what was going on.” I blamed her not at all; I hadn’t existed when they were quasi-lovers, wasn’t even a glimmer in her eye.

“I hate him for this,” she said to me. “For all of it, and for doing this to you.”

I didn’t hate him, though. I couldn’t. Still now, on the day I know he leaves for New York, I think about the music he’ll be hearing through his headphones on the flight, and the car he’ll take from the airport to his new high-rise. I haven’t been able look at a piano for the last three months, but I did today. Back in the home I grew up in, Mama and Juliette on either side, holding my hands, the two women tuning the piano centered in my chest. Their smooth skin against my rough, they led me to the bench and placed music sheets in front of me. I looked back at Mama, scared, but she only nodded her head towards the notes on the page, and I closed my eyes and soared.

I am on the subway that takes me back to Montmartre, back from playing my way through heartache. The announcement rings as my stop is called, and for just a moment, I see myself in the glass window of the metro, as the lights of the station appear. My chin rests in my hand; I see the reddened, broken skin on my fingers like daggers in my reflection. I haven’t picked in three months, not since I last saw Jacques, and my hands are recovering. Juliette sits to my left, smiling her Juliette smile. Time heals all wounds, or so I’ve heard from a man I used to love. The metro comes to a stop, and we stand together. Hand in hand, we walk off the car and onto the platform.

### III

#### Moscow

##### **Elliana, 1859**

It's Yom Kippur in the Hebrew year 5620, and I wake up hungry. Before I leave my room, I look to my desk, and make sure the letters are still there, sealed and ready. We're not permitted to write on this holy day, so I scribbled my apologies from the past year on separate pieces of paper yesterday, one for each of my family members. To Torren, I apologize for kicking him that one time a few weeks ago. I'm expecting an apology from him for pulling my hair first. My apology to Jacob is for making fun of his singing when I can hear him in the shower; I'm not sure if he knows I can hear, or if he knows I giggle to myself when I do, but he will in a few hours. Abba's apology letter is for not giving him enough hugs and kisses, because he always tells me he wants more, and Ima's letter says that I am sorry for everything I have done to make her upset, or angry, or hurt. I love her so much, and I hate making her sad. I know the letters will not take away the wrongs, but today is made for righting them. Yesterday, I decorated each one with drawn flowers. I hope my family will love them.

I walk down to the kitchen from my room, making my bed with tight corners before I leave, just like Ima taught me. On the landing of the stairs, I sweep aside Torren's lapta bat, a gift for his fourteenth birthday from Sabba and Safta. He is always leaving things around—it is the only thing Ima really yells at him for. After meandering down to the kitchen, I stand in front of the pantry, my small feet lined up with the edges of the door, and make eye contact with the oats I cover in milk that is my routine indulgence during the early morning hours. Today, though, I just look, and think about how hungry my family will be for the next twenty-four hours. The



house is quiet, and I pad my way through the sparkling kitchen. Ima always keeps a clean home. She says that there are few things in this life we can control, and not being messy, not leaving a *belagan*, is one of them.

The countertops are a bright white, and a painting of my family hangs on the wall, opposite the stovetop. The painting was commissioned just a few years ago. In it, Abba and Ima stand over Jacob, Torren and me. I stand in the very center of the portrait, and though we all are dressed in navy blue shirts with white trim and tan pants, my smile is the biggest on all five faces. Ima's eyes shine out, the most beautiful hue of green you'd ever see, and Torren's mirror them. Abba's mustache holds weight in the frame, and his hand rests on Jacob's shoulder, his gold ring glinting in the painter's faux flash. I stand between my two brothers and link my arms through theirs, and when I look at the picture, I can still feel the weight of their arms against mine, can feel the painter's eyes on my own, can remember the stillness and the waiting and the payoff. I turn away from the picture, and move to the great room.

I often walk down the memory lane that lines the walls of my home. Torren and Jacob's Bar Mitzvah photos are interspersed with pictures of Ima and Abba's wedding, and Doda and Dod's. I often wish I could see photos from Sabba and Safta's wedding, and Babushka and Dedsuhka's, but they're too old, and were married long before the world began to capture still moments. Looking at the pictures and being in the room always gives me the distinct feeling of an upcoming celebration, each happy moment caught for eternity on a small sheet of paper. I close my eyes and count in my head. 212 days until I become a Bat Mitzvah, 212 days until I have a photo on the wall for myself. Unlike Jacob or Torren, I won't be reading from the Torah or reciting a *haftorah*. They often make fun of me, like being a girl was my choice, but I don't

mind; I have much less studying and practicing to do, and I remember their constant complaints in the weeks leading up to their celebrations.

The blue and white paisley wallpaper runs the length of two living room walls, and follows up behind the banister. Photos are hung all around, and the dark grey furniture in the living room holds a warm contrast to the elegant space. The dining room table sits in the room next to the foyer, and is maybe my favorite thing in the entire house. Ima and Abba make family dinner more than a routine. It is a ritual, my favorite obligation. On Friday nights, after synagogue, Abba and the boys would return from Shabbat services to a house that was nearly floating in the thick, delicious air. Aromas would waft throughout, top to bottom, from my parents' room to the dining room table, where Ima and I had set out the night's meal. Covered *challah* and the Kiddush cup were the bookend of Abba's side of the table, and Ima often spent the day in the kitchen leading up to the Sabbath preparing our meals for the next twenty-four hours. She is a fabulous cook, and takes pride in feeding her family. She makes a honey-roasted chicken that I daydream about in school.

We had sat around the dining room table more nights than I could count, sharing stories of our days and of what we'd learned in school. Abba would tell us of his projects at work, of the city planning he works. Ima, who works as Rabbi Levi's secretary, always had warm wishes for us from the Rabbi and his wife, Devorah. On holidays, both sets of grandparents would come and join us around our table, and the room would pulse with even more love. Babushka's health was "in decline," as Abba said, and those nights would sometimes be cut short with Babushka headed to sleep in the guest room made for her and Dedushka. My parents told me she suffered from intense migraines; once, however, I accidentally drank from her water cup, to find out it

wasn't water at all. I remember thinking that if I had been drinking whatever she was, I'd have a headache just from the smell.

My stomach still rumbling, I make my way up the steps, my small feet delicate on the creaky wood. Focused on the photographs lining the stairs, I don't pay attention when my foot misses the last step before the landing. With my eyes still on my favorite photo in the house, the one of Ima and me just a few days after I was born, I fall head first, my left leg flailing out from under me. I squeeze my eyes shut when all I can see is tan wood moving towards me, and I feel a sharp pain on the left corner of my temple before I slide down the stairs. The butt of the lapta bat had connected with my forehead, and I reach to feel sticky, wet blood ooze down my face, blurring my vision. I lay there, on the steps, sobbing silently until ravaged screams begin to escape. When I blink open, Ima is there, her green eyes the size of cantaloupes and sweat beads on her forehead. She tells me it will be okay, not to worry, not to worry.

"It is Yom Kippur, and Adonai will not let you die. Not today. I know you are written in the Book of Life."

I try to nod, to speak, tell her I love her, tell her I love them all. Instead, I say nothing, and the world around me slowly fades to black.

### **Sugar, 1955**

It is Yom Kippur in the Hebrew year 5716, and I leave synagogue after the morning service, because even on a day like today, a girl like me has to work. I begin my walk to the underground stop, about a mile from *shul*, and decide to cut through the gardens. I know it may make me a few minutes late, but I don't go on until the early bird crowd arrives, and I'm thinking of Rabbi's sermon this morning, how he spoke of the fleeting moments that compile

into one grand flash that is our life. Rabbi Yurkovich was prophetic, even in his Shabbat services, and he once told me he began working on the High Holiday sermons just days after Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur ended, wanting a whole year to perfect his words. It is a beautiful day in Kiev, and the gardens glow in early afternoon sunshine. September in the city is my favorite month; the days are still warm, and there isn't much rain. Summer slowly evaporates to fall, but September is the glorious in-between, the month of long days and pink and white hydrangeas. St. Volodymyr's Cathedral stands tall across the entrance from the gardens, its yellow brick and blue tops looming high against white clouds. Tourists mill around me, taking in the sights, and their accented voices reach my ears as they butcher pronunciation and pose for pictures. I make my way to my favorite bench, and sit in the center of the wood planks, allowing the sunrays to wash over me and warm my face. I can hear the Rabbi's voice like I'm still sitting in the pews.

"Yom Kippur is our holiest day. It is our day of repentance, of forgiveness, of making peace with the past and acknowledging the future. It is a day of contemplation, of surrender. So I invite you to hear my words and consider what they may mean, just for you.

"We walk through each day in blissful ignorance. As wars wage and lives are taken, we shut ourselves off to the outside world and exist in bubbles. We meet friends and break bread, drink too many glasses of wine and forget to say the *Shema*, too busy going through the motions to thank *Adonai* for our existence. We have babies, honor Abraham's covenant and bris the boys. Our sons and daughters become Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, and we see the miracle of union as couples marry and the glass breaks under the *chupah*.

“We break glass during weddings to remind us that even in the happiest moments of our lives, there is potential for pain, for undoing. We break glass to hear the collapse of the happiness of others, the jagged edges of their heartbreak and their shrieks that come from deep within.

“Our lives are only a collection of smaller moments, memories, strung together with bliss and agony. What we remember – the good, the bad – is arbitrary. The only thing that is truly important is that in the mundane, just as in the exciting and the horrific, there is possibility for reflection, for gratitude and inner peace. Yom Kippur is the burst of the bubble, the day when we must remind ourselves that our flashes of life come together and turn into all that we know. Today is the day we start again, clean our slate and work to piece it all together, to remember that all we have is one life, for better or worse. So take this with you when you leave, and hold it tight for another year: the universe grows and changes, and so do you. Look into your heart and decide how you want to live, today, tomorrow, for forever. Exist in each moment so that when we have days like today, opportunities for clarity and wholesomeness, we may appreciate the glory *Adonai* has given us, and weep for the hardship and pain of others. Repent, release, and feel reborn. *Gamar chatimah tovah.*”

When Mama got sick, it was Rabbi Yurkovich who came to the small hospital on the outskirts of the city to pray with me, for me. I feel her here, in the garden, in synagogue, holding my hand and kissing my cheek. I remember how she sang to me, *Shalom Alechem*, each night before bed. I think of broken glass, of my mother’s soft, sagged face, and uncross my legs. It is time for me to work.

When I arrive, Grigory greets me at the door, and pulls me in for one of his famous, encompassing hugs. He knows today is one of the hardest of the year, and his eyes look sad as I smile at him and move towards the dressing area. Music already plays in the club, and I sit at my

station, pushing the blonde, stringy hair away from my face and into a loose bun atop my head. I begin to apply makeup, line my blue eyes with black kohl, cake on a glittery paste on the crease of my eyelids. I pay extra attention to the birthmark on my temple, letting cover up blur the spot from a noticeable circle to a faded smudge. Pink blush, to match the lipstick I apply last, sits on the apples of my cheekbones, and I let down my hair, scrunching it with spray to make it messy and touchable. I finger through the flimsy material that hangs on wire racks. Black satin and polyester blends make shiny bras and underwear with holes in unmentionable places. I am not excited today, have no jitters that usually accompany the first moment of the night where I am seen. I feel dirty and sinful, to be working today, but men with hungry eyes and greedy fingers take no time off from their full time jobs, and neither do I.

I lace the cream-colored bodice up my chest with shaking hands, and urge the tears that have begun to collect in my eyes to evaporate into the smoky air. The thong underwear sits high on my hipbones, and as I slip my feet into the platform heels, Mila finishes her set and comes up behind me.

“I’m starving,” she says.

“Me too,” I answer. When I finish tonight, we will break our fast together, in the comfort of our small apartment with little furniture and two mattresses on the floor. Before that though, I will dance around for men and collect the rubles that trail along my feet. Hopefully, I’ll be requested for a private dance, in one of the makeshift rooms that is separated from the rest of the club with nearly see-through sheets, and hopefully, the man will be generous with his tip.

“You’re up after Lydia, Sugar,” Grigory calls, his throaty voice quiet in the background of the pulsing music. I open the right drawer of my desk, and grab the small baggie with the medication Mama used to take that I keep there. I take out a pill, hold it up to the light, and set it

down on the handheld mirror I've taken from Zina's station, two down from mine. With the pad of my thumb, I crush the pill into powder against the glass. I feel more relaxed, looser, after I swallow one, but I feel high as a kite in summer when I snort, instead. A rolled bill sits next to the glass, and I line the powder into three neat strips. Leaning my head down, I stick the bill in my right nostril, and sniff. Without looking up, I switch nostrils, and take the second and third lines in quick succession. A drip starts from the base of my sinuses, down past my throat, and into my bloodstream. I cannot look in the mirror; I don't want to see my dilated pupils, or look at my reflection and know that the paint on my face doesn't make me unrecognizable. I let the music carry me from the dressing room to the stage, and as I take my place in front of hungry eyes, the stage light goes bright and I'm on.

Just as I prepare for my biggest dance move, the one that always prompts the most money to fly from sausage fingers, my heart beats too big in my chest. My palms are slick with moisture, my breathing becomes shallow, and the back of my neck feels like I've been sitting close to a fire for too long. Blank faces look at me with sneers, alcohol-reddened cheeks pulled into grimace-smiles. I'm having a bad reaction, to the powder, to the stage, to the men with hardness pressed against zippers in their laps. I try for the move again, urge my legs to open in a split against the floor, but I feel my bottom half give out as I crumble to a pile on the dirty surface. Unsatisfied customers boo from the darkness, and I'm lifted from the stage by Grigory's strong arms. He cradles me like a child and moves me back to the dressing room as Zina walks out, ready to save the show. His face creases with concern as he sets me on my chair, and before he can question me, I grab my long jacket and the clothes I walked in wearing, before running out the backdoor.

Grigory yells after me as I sprint from the club, but I can't make out his words as I run across the street, to the gas station with the public bathroom. I move to the back of the building and find the doorknob, turning it to let myself in. Locking the door, I fumble my way to the floor, my erratic, shallow breaths emitting from my body in spurts. I sit on the gunk-covered tile, my back against one of the four walls, and hold my head between my legs that are brought to my chest. Rabbi Yurkovich's voice finds me here; this is one of the moments, one of the memories that make up my life. It is both the mundane and the exciting; it is a mix of my regular, my worst, and somehow, my beginning. Finally able to compose a full breath, I make my way to the yellowing sink and lean my weight against it. My reflection looks back at me in shambles; my makeup is blotchy, my skin hot, and black inner circles take up most of my blue eyes. My forehead throbs, and I move to massage my temples, my fingers landing on the circular birthmark on the edge of my hairline. It may just be my imagination, but the brown mark feels hotter than the rest of my head, anywhere else on my skin, warmer than my entire body. I don't feel like myself; I feel younger, smaller, terrified and alone. *Look into your heart*, I hear the Rabbi say, and as I make eye contact with my reflection again, I see a girl no older than eleven looking back at me. Her tanned skin and intense blue eyes hold stark contrast to her long, thick brown hair. She smiles widely, and her eyelashes cascade up and down with each blink. Her torso is clothed in a sleeping robe, and dried blood sits in a raised circle near the edge of her hairline. I move my hand to the mirror and trace the outline of her face, resting my fingers on her injured temple. *Elliana*, I whisper, my voice cracking with comfort and realization, though I have never been more confused in my life. I squeeze my eyes shut and see a blue, paisley pattern. Photographs of my brothers hang on the walls, and I can see them so clearly, though I am an only child. The sink I'm holding on to for support turns into a long, dining room table and I can



hear laughter, vibrant and rolling. *She died from blunt trauma, a lapta bat colliding with the bridge of her temple. Look into your heart. Adonai...*

### **Esfir, 2017**

It's Yom Kippur morning in the Hebrew year 5778, and I've had the dream again. This time, though, it was longer, and clearer, and I am more tired now than I was before I slept. After a week of half-slumbered dreams consisting of blurry bathroom components (a toilet seat I can just identify, an empty paper towel dispenser), I can see everything, like I'm watching the scene through a crystal ball. Finally, I'm standing in front of the mirror, my eyes the color of freshly oozed blood, my hair in knots down my back. Behind me is a public bathroom, unkempt. There is a vulgar note written in Sharpie on the white wall next to a drawing of a penis, and I read it in the mirror's reflection. *Looking for a good time? Call 555-5716.* There are droplets of yellow on the plastic toilet seat, and a cockroach scurries on the outer edges of my peripheral vision. I notice the background, of course, but I am locked in on my own reflection. I trace the outline of my face with my eyes, circling over my nose and mouth and cheekbones and lips and eyebrows and the barely visible birthmark that peeks out from behind baby hairs on my left temple. All at once, I can't breathe, I'm hyperventilating to my own image, because it's so clear and I know. I know I've lived this life before. My eyes go back to the phone number, 5716, 5716, and it's not a phone number at all, but the year in which I'm seeing myself, the year I've already lived. I wake in a pool of my own perspiration, like I've had a fever that broke overnight. My shirt is stuck to my back, and I wipe the sweat beads from my face. Slowly, I climb out of bed, careful not to disturb Ari, sleeping soundly with his mouth open against the pillow. His nose is scrunched and his breathing slow, and it takes every ounce of the Good Natured Wife in me to not lean down

and ruffle his hair and kiss his parted lips. He would hold me and tell me everything was going to be just fine, run his fingers over my temples and massage in small circles. He wouldn't fall back asleep until he knew I was okay, but I *am* okay. Nothing has changed, I am here, in our house, in the home we have built through family and shared meals and unadulterated, passionate, sweet love. I can handle this on my own. With nerves pulsing against my skin, I begin pacing the hallway, shutting the door to our bedroom quietly on the way out. After hurrying up and down the narrow corridor a few times, my body finds its way to her room. Opening the door silently, I move in like a shadow over her crib, careful not to step too loudly or cough even once. I need to see her, am absolutely desperate to hold her, feel her skin, caress her cheek against mine and match my heartbeat with her own. I reach down for my sweet girl and bring her to my chest, walking over to the rocking chair in the corner of the room. The rocking chair has been in our family for generations; it is elaborate, painted a silvery purple, with flecks of gold added that look like stars. When I sit in it, I feel like I am in the middle of the night sky, a constellation in the heavens. I adjust in the seat, propping her up against my collarbone, so I can feel my daughter's soft breath escape onto my neck and pool in the enclave between bone and skin. I hold her tightly, gripping her small frame with all the strength I can muster, trying to transfer every morsel of love I possess for her into her body, almost as if by osmosis.

In the dark, my dream plays in my head like it is projected on the big screen of my eyelids. I keep seeing my face, and it isn't so much that the woman in the mirror's reflection looked gaunt or disheveled or even rather wild, though that is all true; it is the fact that I know I have lived that moment, been there in that fraction of time. It is impossible to understand, but my dream wasn't dreamlike. It was real, tangible, disgusting, and true. And, it was also that I hadn't been myself in the dream, not exactly. I wasn't 5'4" and brunette. My nose was bigger on my

face, my eyes wider, my hair tangled and vaguely strawberry blonde. My body was slender as it is now, but taller, more athletic. I was different, standing in the dirty bathroom, but I knew as I took in the mirror's reflection, I was looking at myself. The panic that burst through me with that bout of realization was the same that propelled me out of bed and into my daughter's room. Who was the woman I had been in the dream? Why had I known her, why had I felt like I had been in her skin before? I knew the way she laughed with a smoker's throat, and the way she chewed her nails when she was nervous in public, but I had never seen her before. Sitting in the rocking chair, I bring my left hand to my scalp and feel for the slightly raised birthmark that has existed on the outer edges of my facial features for as long as I can remember. Hadn't the woman in the dream had the same brown circle, the same bump from birth?

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Ari wakes me from a dreamless sleep with a kiss on the forehead and a loss of pressure from my arms and chest. My eyes open to see my husband holding our girl, her arms flailing in the first moments of her morning. I look around and realize I'm still in the rocking chair, Eve's light-purple room bright in the sunlight. I look up at the ceiling, appreciating the constellations painted against the black ceiling in vibrant gold. Ari's brother painted Eve's room for us when she was still in the womb; we had decided to keep the sex a surprise, and thought purple and the heavens were a gender-friendly theme. I am hungry and thirsty, but my fast began last night, and we'll leave for services soon. The young woman's reflection is vivid in my head, and I'm still tracing the outline of her face when we get to synagogue. Ari and I drop Eve at the makeshift daycare that is the Hebrew day school on every other day of the year, and find our way among the congregation into the sanctuary.

When it is time for Rabbi Yurkovich's sermon, my stomach rumbles and Ari reaches for my hand. Rabbi Yurkovich took over for Rabbi Ivanov a few years, and my bias prevents me from finding the same comfort in the newer, younger rabbi's words. Rabbi Ivanov married us, and married my parents years ago. He Bat Mitzvahed my sister and me, and when he announced his retirement, my whole family went to his house for Shabbat and shed tears of gratitude for his spiritual guidance. Ari didn't mind Rabbi Yurkovich, but I thought he had much to learn.

"Congregation, we sit here today on the holiest of holy days, in a synagogue in Saint Petersburg, to repent for the sins we have committed over the last year. We join together to ask *Adonai* for forgiveness, for pardon, for ethereal empathy. Our almighty Lord understands us, and grants us the opportunity to make amends as we move forward from this year to the next. So let me impart what wisdom I may on you, on this special day.

"My father was a Rabbi in Kiev years ago, and while I prepared for my first Yom Kippur as your Rabbi here, I turned to him for guidance. We spent many hours discussing this holy day; we began by defining what today meant for us, and then what it meant for the Jewish people. We talked of repentance and sin, of forgiveness and growth. But most importantly, we spoke of moments. My father told me of a sermon he gave when he was a Rabbi, and I'd like to share an edited version of his words with you, now.

"Papa believes that life is a connection of moments, pieced together in a unique pattern by the things inside each person that makes them special. He said he often came back to this belief during Yom Kippur; he wanted to remind his congregation that their lives were only as big or small as they themselves believed them to be. I think this is a consideration all of us could benefit from, so let me explain.

“Growing up, my father often reminded me that my reality was subject to fleeting milliseconds, parsed together by what we call time. He told me that my reality was not always the reality of others, though sometimes, in beautiful and exceptional cases, different people’s realities could look the same. But he was adamant about one thing: reality, moments, and time were subject to interpretation. My father, bless him, believes in the human’s ability to alter each millisecond, even if just in the smallest of ways. He believes this can be achieved through goodness, kindness, and forgiveness. This, to me, is what Yom Kippur is about.

“Papa always told me to look into my heart, and find the truth. He told me that inside, I knew who I was, what I believed in, and the infinite possibilities I had to make each millisecond exactly what I wanted. He told me to look past the labels of good, bad, happy, and sad, and find the feelings, instead. He encouraged me to open my soul to the ecstasy and profound pain of the world, and use those energies to create the life I wanted to live. So on a day like today, I encourage you to do the same. Don’t think about the past, or the future, but think about this millisecond, the one you have right here. Think of all the goodness you hope to fill it with, all the love and hope and wonder, and hold on to it. You can make this into every millisecond, into your reality, if you so choose. And I urge you to try. Look into your heart, and hold the moments of your life still for long enough to take a breath. You know who you are, what you believe in, and what you want for your life. Now make that your reality.”

I don’t know why, but as the Rabbi finishes his speech, my throat feels like it is closing, maybe forever.

“I’ll be right back,” I whisper to Ari as I release his hand, and slide out of the pew. With my head down, I exit the sanctuary, nearly hyperventilating. I beeline for the bathroom, my heels clicking on the tile of the synagogue’s floor, then on the concrete outside. Making my way

around the corner, I push open the door that reads *WOMEN*, and lean against the marble sink, desperate for some support. When I look into the mirror, I see the bathroom from my dream; the cracked glass and the birthmark and the bright blue eyes that look so much like my own stare back at me. I swallow, and taste sugar on my tongue. It doesn't make sense, but somewhere, at the bottom of myself, the basis of my being, I know. I think of Ari and Eve, and rub my forehead as images of an antique-looking two-story home with a dining room table dance across my mind. I see the inside of what looks like a brothel, worn-down couches and half-naked girls carrying trays of amber liquid in glasses. I see a lush botanical garden, and the classroom in an elementary school, where I can remember sitting for hours at a time, daydreaming of family dinners and a honey-roasted chicken. It doesn't make sense, but somehow, I know. I look into the mirror, and see her, Sugar, her blonde hair and her wide nose and her birthmark. I exhale, close my eyes, and open them again, to see Elli, small for her age but brimming with potential, energy that I remember was wasted too soon. The faces change and the birthmark stay the same, the blue eyes in different sockets, the same spirit soaring from life to life. My throat feels smaller than ever before, and I lean my head underneath the faucet, breaking my fast with cold water that I greedily slurp. Here I am, and here they are, the glass of the mirror like the clear wall of another dimension, another lifetime. Milliseconds and moments mingle, and I move my left hand to my birthmark, my right to my beating chest. We are all here, in this bathroom, on this Yom Kippur. It takes me a few more minutes to realize we are all here, have always been here, in every action, in every kiss and laugh and smile and tear. We will always be here, and there will be more I will remember, and still more to come.

**Nicolai, 2072**

It is Yom Kippur in the year 5833, and as I ride Moscow's subway to work as a bouncer in an adult club and see the elaborate mosaics at each stop, they circle my mind in a flood of visions. Their physical presences live in whatever body my soul is anchored to, and I move through life now with strings of memories I drag behind me like precious, heavy cargo.

I still feel Esfir in the crease of my right arm, where my elbow bends. I was younger then, and more wrapped up in the goodness of the world. Our life together was full—Ari made sure of that. I close my eyes and see our daughter's sixteenth birthday playing like it's being projected from the chambers of my heart to the back of my eyelids.

The backyard is filled with throngs of teenagers. Boys with lean torsos swim through the pool and reflect light off their pale backs, their skin taut on their bones as their bodies continue to grow. Girls in small bikinis, pink, blue, and metallic, lounge on beach towels that lie overlapping on the grass. Eve is in the middle of the backyard, standing in a group of friends and sipping on a drink from a plastic cup. Her white smile catches the light of the sun and she seems to glow, has always seemed to glow, brighter than anyone around her, and her laugh mixes with the music vibrating the speakers and the world gleams.

Ari looks at her with pride. His smile is nearly as big as hers, and he reaches for my hand, giving it a tight, momentary squeeze. Later, we cut the cake, bring all the kids inside and turn off the lights. A marble cake with vanilla frosting and sixteen silver candles slides from Ari's hands to the table in front of her, and she mouths the words "thank you" to her father. He winks and backs away, and a chorus of mismatched voices fills the space of a Saint Petersburg home. Empty dishes that held chicken skewers on a bed of rice and half-filled bowls with chips litter the kitchen island, and a sunset with colors as bright as Eve's smile itself seeps in from the

massive windows that pane the wall leading outside. The house is washed in gold and pink, and Eve's skin turns a shimmery color as she forms her mouth into an *o* and blows out the candles. Applause is loud and boisterous, and she is sixteen, sweet and sixteen, and she has her whole life in front of her. I will never forget.

Sugar is my legs, and I feel her when I move. Her strength propels me forward, even now. She was my first remembrance, my first recollection. I look back on our life with a melancholy mix of pride and loneliness. I remember the brothel better than anything, can still feel the leather couches and the heavy curtains that separated the dressing room when I move my thumb and index finger together. I see Grigory, my favorite bouncer, with his bald head and grisly scar that descended from the corner of his mouth to the lower edge of his jaw. Mila greets me with a kiss on the cheek and a slap on the bum, and I see the rows of outfits, skimpy little things, hanging from cheap plastic hangers. White powder sits on a handheld mirror at Zina's station, and I roll up a flimsy bill. When my head moves up, the world looks clear, and I feel warm like the Earth is on fire. For what feels like a split-second, I forget where I really am, and give in to the music, the routine, the push and pull and twist and gyrate on the floor, for the men who I hope will want to spend their money on me. I move with the rhythm of the music, my eyes half-closed, my feet on plastic platform heels that shine in the stage light. Hollers reach my ears in my trance-like state, and I know I'm good at my job. I look down at my feet to see bills littering the black surface. There's a distinct sense of hope I feel in my reverie, a hope I never got to truly know. I went back to the club once, years later, when I was no longer Sugar. I asked for Grigory, but he had left. Mila and Zina, too.

Elliana resides in the center of my head, at the forefront of my cerebral cortex, pushed up against the skin of my forehead in the mushed concavities of my brain. My memories of her, of



us, are the most blurred and the most bright. It's more of a feeling when remembering Elli, but I can still make out the inside of the house in which I was born. The paisley wallpaper, the photos lining the walls, wafting smells of Shabbat dinners and Hanukkah latkes through the air, even now. The boys come back to me, and I see their Bar Mitzvahs at Beth Aretz. Torren first, on the *bimah*, chanting his *haftarah* and fixing his *kippah* from falling off his head. Then, Jacob, shaking hands with Rabbi Levi and beaming at the congregation, winking at Ima, Abba, and me from his elevated state. I see the Eternal Flame high above their heads, the massive ark that made me think of Noah from the Bible, and the sense of warmth that filled me whenever I stepped into our synagogue. I parse together what I have left of us, of my sweet Elliana and my first life, cut too short. I take the teachings of each life with me on to the next, and move through the world with the inability to take things too seriously. I feel a deep affinity with them all, feel them pulsing through my bloodstream and the synapses in my brain. I recite their names aloud each night before bed. *Elliana, Shane, Sugar, David, Esfir, Nicolai*; the list of my recollection has grown, and will go on and on.

I've begun to sense when others are like me, can feel it in the ripples of air that radiate from their bodies. In the subway, the air is static, except that which comes from the far corner of the car, opposite me. I look in that direction, and see a young girl with her mother, reading a book. Her feet dangle over the chair, inches from the ground, and I wonder when she'll realize, or if she ever will. Many go through life after life without ever fully knowing.

The car slows as we enter my final station, and I see my reflection in the dirty glass. My broad, flat chest sits up straight, my back against the seat. Square glasses in a black frame line my piercing blue eyes, and my large right hand moves to push them higher on the bridge of my slightly crooked, broken-from-years-ago nose. Even in the dim light, my eyes move to the

birthmark that sits profoundly on the left corner of my forehead, unmasked by long hair or makeup in this lifetime. I repeat their names under my breath, look once more at the young girl and her *ima*, and walk off the car.

## IV

### London

Sasha is screaming with a fierceness that would make mountains move. It's a guttural scream, coming from somewhere deep within her three-foot body, ripping up through her lungs and escaping from her throat with authority. She's exhausted, has been since she fell asleep at lunch while sitting on her father's lap with her head rested against his shoulder. Her siblings are handling the jetlag with more grace; Amelia's eyes have been drooping for the past few hours, but she's never been one to complain. Lucas, true to his form, refuses to admit his exhaustion. He keeps looking around with the most pure sense of wonder, as if the thousand-year-old city in front of him will disappear if he doesn't keep his eyes peeled. My sweet boy, brimming with curiosity since the moment he was born.

Dean and I tried to keep them awake yesterday after we landed, but our efforts, valiant as they were, were defeated by the unadulterated, consistent tick of the clock. They all fell asleep around 4:30 in the afternoon, and he told me to go, that he'd keep watch. We're staying on The Strand, and I couldn't quite resist the sweet lure of a London day seeping into a sweeter close, so I slipped out of the front door with four quick kisses, one for each of my babes.

I made a left out of the hotel, down towards Southwark Bridge. Yesterday was warm, a beautiful June day, full of a glistening Thames that reflected sharp projections of crystalized light. I walked the bridge I had walked twenty-two years earlier, as an almost entirely different person. I thought of him first, of his round glasses and toothy smile, his never-ending laugh. Then, I thought of myself, twenty years ago. I thought of the curly blonde hair that straightened and darkened after I had Amelia, of the lean, tall body I used to inhabit. I thought of the girl I

used to believe myself to be, and of the woman I know I am now. The Melanie who lived in London for five months to study abroad was wracked with insecurities, the desire to soak up every lesson the world had to teach. She was headstrong and emotional and naively confident, in the most charming way. She was entirely sure of her ability to change the world; at the very least, she was absolutely desperate to change her own. I thought about Ma and Daddy, of Trev, before I walked to the National Theatre, passing book flea markets and carts selling Pimm's. I couldn't help but smile. It was inexplicably good to be back, and I couldn't wait to walk around with my sweet family.

Twenty-four hours have passed since my blissful walk, and rush hour in the London Underground is a competitive rival to some of the busiest New York streets, any time of day. "Sasha! Enough." Dean's tone is firm, sure. He holds her hand as we take our first step onto the descending escalator, his other hand on Lucas' shoulder, a step below him. Amelia stands to my left, leaning into me with all of her seventy-two pound body weight. She looks at her struggling sister with pursed lips, disappointment clear in her eyes. "No sister of mine," her eyes say. I look down at my eldest daughter with a smile. She is wise beyond her years, soul older than my own. I plant a kiss on the top of her head.

The floor is fast approaching, and the solace of silence Sasha blessed us with for twenty-eight seconds looks to be coming to a rapid close in accordance with the end of the escalator. As she opens her mouth, I scoop her up from behind, turning her midair to face my front and press her head to my chest, stifling her sobs. Businessmen move about us, briefcases and shined shoes abundant on the white linoleum floor. Women in dresses and high heels click past my fumbling family, holding shopping bags and laughing with deep red lips. Friends pass, chatting softly, speaking of evening plans and pre-drinks, their voices lofting gently above them, promising a

night of excitement. Young girls and boys in school uniforms, young mothers and fathers, pushing their babies in prams, women, men, lovers, everyday you-and-mes, all the life in London, stepping through their dwindling day, looking to get home by way of the Leicester Square Underground Stop.

Terrified of judging English eyes, my hand holds Sasha's head close to my skin, and I can feel her quick, hot breath. Wetness seeps through my white blouse and I know tired tears are falling.

"Shh, baby, it's okay. Sleep on Mommy. Go ahead."

Sasha's moon-sized eyes peer up at me, and I nod my head. "Sleep, my darling girl. I have you."

Dean funnels the children against the herd of people moving in every direction, leading us towards the southbound platform, and I follow just a few steps behind. Before we turn out of the main corridor and into a more specific oblivion, round glasses pass me in a flutter of big teeth and bouncing laugh. My head whips around to follow the boisterous noise, the beautiful boy with his eyes to the ceiling. I blink hard, clear the grain film that's formed around my eyes, the reel of moments from some twenty past years. The sound of his laugh plays on loop in my brain as his feet move further and further away, and all of a sudden, I'm remembering everything about the guy I maybe used to love. God, it brings me right back to each time my life was gifted with that infectious laugh. That boy, that passed, had to be him... it's twenty years later, and it had to be him.

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A month and a half into my term abroad, I was at a pub on a Thursday evening, drinking the dregs of my pint and scribbling in the black journal I carried around religiously.

I had spoken with my dad that morning, a ten-minute phone conversation that left me feeling like I was the only person in the world that wasn't sipping some universal Kool-Aid, besides maybe Trevor. After catching him up on how classes were going and describing a few of my favorite pubs, he said my name the way he does when I know devastation to my world is about to register on the Richter scale.

"Melanie..."

"Dad?"

"Have you spoken to your mother recently?"

Daddy asking about Mom was never a good thing. When I was younger, he used to ask where she was, who she was seeing, what she was doing. *Is that boyfriend of hers still around? Did she come home last night? Well, she'll be home soon enough. You know... I would come, but I have a lady friend over, and it's not my day. I'll see you and Trev this weekend, baby.* Click. Then, in the teenage years, when they were on again, off again, the questions were more thoughtful, more loaded. *Has your Ma said anything to you about me lately? Everything's fine, I just ask because she hasn't returned my calls in a few days. Well, we were having words a few nights ago but I wouldn't call it fighting. Yes, she was crying, Melanie, but I didn't do anything to hurt her. Your mother's a fragile woman.* On mine and Trevor's eighteenth birthday, over dinner at a Chinese restaurant with all our friends from high school, our parents got into a screaming match in the parking lot before appetizers arrived. Our table had a clear view of the show, and Trevor and I stared at each other, twin telepathy buzzing between us, trying to come up with some solution to put an end to the nightmare we found ourselves living. Luckily, Trev was good under pressure, and managed to enthrall everyone in one of his classic Friday night lights stories, in which he saved the game, and subsequently the day, in the last quarter. I was

proud of my brother, and grateful for him especially then, when all I wanted to do was melt into a puddle and slide my way through the front doors, ready to disappear.

After that dinner, Trev and I sat our parents on the couch in Mom's living room, and told them we didn't approve of their relationship. It was toxic, had always been toxic, would always be toxic. We asked them to face the facts: they had tried. No one could call them easy quitters, but their togetherness was clearly not meant to be. Mom cried, and held Daddy's hand. He tried to wipe her tears away, which made Trev yell at Daddy, and Mom cry harder. Meanwhile, I shrieked from the corner of the sectional, full of disbelief and mourning over the loss of an ideal, even normal, family. It was then I decided I had to leave home for school; Trev had committed to college an hour west, to play football in Seattle, and I figured I'd just follow him. As I threw a tantrum on the first day of adulthood, I realized an hour was too close to it all. In a matter of moments, I had set my sights on the East Coast.

They did break up for a while after that night, and Mom even had a boyfriend for a year or so who had been my favorite yet. But when Daddy called, and said my name, the anxiety I had worked so hard to dispel crawled right back into the soft parts of my skin and found its way happily to my bloodstream. The only outlet I had ever known was writing. Growing up, I could normally be found with my head in a journal, big, loopy handwriting making its way from pen to page. Writing was the only thing that ever made me feel like I could breathe. When I transferred my all-consuming thoughts from my pounding brain to the page in front of me, the knots in my stomach would loosen and my lungs would expand. I would talk to Trevor, and I often did. Trev was a great listener, my very best friend, but he was still his own person, at the end of the day. And, he had football as his outlet. I started writing when he had gotten me a cheap spiral notebook from the dollar store for my half birthday when we were eight. I had gotten him his

favorite Mariners pitcher's baseball card. Six months later, Daddy would take us to our first Seahawks game, and Trev would stop collecting baseball cards altogether.

On the phone with my father, I told him I hadn't talked to Mom recently. He only responded with, "Maybe you should call her." I got off the phone with him as quickly as I could, and made my way to the pub to write. After an hour or so, I finished my impassioned, wordy vent and closed my journal, still holding it as I hooked the straps of my bag over my shoulder. I stepped outside after thanking the bartender, and lit a cigarette a few paces down from the front door. My nose was still in my journal, rereading my latest words, when I heard his voice.

"Have you got a light?"

I turned from the page to the face of a young man. He stood on the steps in front of the pub, a rolled cigarette playing in his fingertips. His eyebrow was cocked above the round frame of the glasses that sat in front of his magnified eyes, giving him a slightly crooked affect. His mouth was pulled into a playful smile, his full lips smirked to the left side of his face.

I reached into the back pocket of my Levi's and grabbed the Zippo lighter I had brought from home. It was black, with pink lightning bolts up and down, though the paint had faded from use. I had bought it on my eighteenth birthday, in the pile of my first legal adult purchases, along with a lotto ticket, and a porn magazine I gave to my twin brother as a birthday present. I took a step closer to him, flicked the spark wheel, and leaned forward to light the cigarette sitting in his mouth. He inhaled deeply.

"Cheers, love."

"No worries," I answered.

"Are you American?"

"How could you tell?"



“If I’m honest, I heard you order inside. I love your accent.”

“And I love yours.” I reached my hand out. “My name’s Melanie. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Adam. Pleasure.”

I took a deep drag from my dwindling cigarette, and checked the time on my wristwatch.

“Well, I hope you have a good –”

“Wait, um, Melanie, right? Are you leaving, just now? Could I buy you a pint?”

“I was just about to head home. I’ve got an early class tomorrow.”

“Are you staying around here?”

“We’ve been told not to tell strangers where we’re staying,” I said with a smile. I was standing right next to Adam, our sides practically touching, our words turning to cool air that blew from face to face.

“Look, I’d love to buy you a drink. Whether that’s today or tomorrow, I don’t necessarily mind, but I’d love to buy you a drink. Take my number, won’t you?”

So I did, and I gave him mine. He told me he’d call, and I walked away from the pub without turning back, lightness in my step the whole way home.

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The night after we met, I dreamt about Adam. He’s in my childhood home, sitting around the dining room table with me, Daddy, Mom, and Trev. His eyes look massive behind his glasses, and Trev is trying to explain the rules of American football, but Adam insists on talking soccer. Daddy is looking at Mom and I’m looking at Adam, and Daddy says “Melanie” the way I fear hearing my name said every day. I wake up early, and check my phone to see a text from Adam, asking me out for drinks that night. I text him my address. *See you at 8. x*

He picks me up outside my extended living building, and reaches for my hand. Adam leads me across the street, into the gates of the Camden Market. He opens the door to a bar, and I follow him inside.

We're sitting across from each other at a two-person table. The lights from the market's neon sign glow faintly through the window in the cold February air, and I'm shivering despite the warm temperature inside, cultivated by mingling breaths and chatter between mates. Adam looks out at me from behind bifocals; his fingers, which I notice are starkly and painfully white, shuffle the hair atop his head for the fourth time in the twelve minutes we've been in the bar.

"So how long have you been here? When did you arrive?" he asks me.

"Since the beginning of January, actually. Thanks for meeting me so close. Is it out of the way for you?"

"I work just on the outskirts of the city, about a half-hour on the tube. I was in Camden last night because my mate was playing a little gig in the pub I saw you at, but I like it around here. Everyone's well nice, but the beer's a little pricey in the touristy areas. Would you like something to drink?"

Six pints between us later, live music reaches our ears from the guitarist downstairs. We've gotten closer and closer through the night, leaning over the table, bodies propped on elbows, faces inches away. I find him rather beautiful; his eyes glow and his words sound thoughtful and the way he's smiling at me makes me feel like I'm exactly where I'm meant to be. He's nothing like Josh, the only boyfriend I've ever had, one of Trevor's best friends. I tell myself to live in the moment, forget about the high school sweetheart who I only see on winter breaks. Adam is different; it could be the accent, or the way his deft fingers move when he rolls us cigarettes on the table while we're still inside.

His hands keep fidgeting in his hair, and his smile is contagious. I've grown up hearing how bad British teeth are for twenty years, but looking at his, I feel like I want to crawl in his mouth and make a home in the space between the back of his teeth and the tip of his tongue.

"I'm drunk," I say, mostly to myself, but he smiles his smile.

"Welcome to England."

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Sasha's slow, full breaths beat down on my chest as the train comes to another stop. Dean stands, staring at me, his eyes shifting up and down, and I watch as he scans our daughter from the bottom of her chin to the top of her curls, and down again. Lucas and Amelia sit side-by-side, two pairs of drooping eyes. I watch Dean watch me; every so often, his eyes lift from our girl and land at the core of my being. We really started dating because we stared at each other so much; I feel like I've been looking at Dean, looking at me, for a lifetime. There was something about looking at him full on that made me feel like I could hear him without hearing his voice, like I could feel what he wanted and thought and dreamed through vibrations in the air that waded into my head. He's always had a intuitive mind, and the vibrations between us create a circular charm, placing us in our own universe, like in movies the kids watch. Right now, the air tells me he loves me.

I smile at him, and he smiles back. The corners of his lips reach up so high when he grins that they infiltrate his eyes, normally stoic and resolute. The crinkle of his cheek extends beyond his glorious cheekbone, and I look up at the man I married fourteen years ago. His hair has thinned with every rotation around the sun, and he's a little mushier in the middle than he used to be. Still, though, he is both sexy and safe, and fully mine. He is the family I chose, the person I

decided to make a life with. He was the universe's attempt at apology, a hope of redemption in what felt like an ever-deteriorating world.

We get off at the London Bridge Underground station. Sasha is still fast asleep against my chest, and Dean drags Luc and Amelia by their small hands behind him. The Strand is alive, the summer air intoxicating, and the residents can feel it, too. The sun shines in its mild, British way, warming the ground and my cheeks in a comfortable glow. My family and I make our way back to the hotel, and Dean tucks the kids in for a late nap. I'm sitting on the balcony off the main room in our suite when he comes out to meet me, holding two glasses of chilled white wine. I smile and thank him, grateful to have a moment of stillness, and even more grateful to be still with him.

"What's it like, to be back?" Dean asks, his aviator sunglasses reflecting the earliest stages of a sunset sky.

"It's surreal, in a word." I sigh. "It's mind blowing, to be back after all this time... and it's even more mind blowing to have you all here with me. I was an entirely different person last time I was here."

"I know."

"You do, D, but you don't. I was so lost when I was here. Twenty and oblivious. Just lost, desperate to be found."

Dean reaches across the outside table and rests his hand on mine.

"I know," he says again.

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My time in London was plagued with the baggage I carried with me from one continent to another. On the night I left home, Mom and I went to dinner downtown before getting to the

airport. Over her entrée of tofu and rice, in between a bite and sip of water, she put her fork and knife down and sighed.

“Mel, I’m so excited for you,” she said. “You’re about to embark on such a huge milestone in your journey of life, and I couldn’t be more proud.”

My mother, a conglomeration of confusions, had been on a vegan health kick for the last two years. It started when she got t-boned in the middle of an intersection, driving home from a dentist appointment the first week of my freshman year at NYU. Trev called me in hysterics, his words muffled by pants and sobs. Eventually, I managed to make out his words that said her black SUV was totaled, but EMTs that were called to the scene gave her the all clear. Still, though, it was obvious that Mom was rattled. Her loud personality shrank from the life of the party to a shell of the woman she used to be. It was plain on her face over FaceTime; she looked years older than her forty-two year old self, worry lines etched into her forehead where they never used to be. It took six months for her to get behind the wheel of a car again, and Trev dropped out of UW for an undetermined amount of time to take care of her. In that time, she had begun reading self-help books and meeting with a spiritual guru named Sandy. Sandy lived in a run down apartment and operated business in the park a block away from his home. I knew this because Trev had picked Mom up there a few times before, both from the park, and the parking lot outside his condo thirty minutes away. Before it was veganism, world peace, and eternal love, it was martial arts three times a week, and boxing five. Growing up, I never thought my family’s situation could get more bizarre. After the accident, I knew I was wrong.

“Your father, brother, and I are just so thrilled for you. You are so smart, brimming with potential. We can’t wait to see where you end up.

“Before you go, Mel, I wanted to talk to you about something. I know you weren’t the biggest fan of your father and me dating a few years back, and I understand why. We weren’t good for each other then... we were too immature, too close to the people we were when we had you and your brother. But in these last two years, so much has changed. I’ve grown so much, as you well know, and your father has, too. The accident made us realize that life is too short, and the purpose of it all is just to find a way to be happy. Melanie, your father is my happiness. You and your brother are the best things we’ve ever done with our lives. Our family is everything to us. We’ve been talking a lot recently, and ever since the guy from Sandy’s class and I broke up, I’ve been really missing your dad. We decided we’re going to give it another try, me and Daddy. I just wanted you to know.”

My mother stared at me, and I stared at my plate. I set my knife and fork down, appetite lost.

“I think this is a mistake,” was all I could muster.

“You’re wrong. Your father and I are soul mates. It’s taken us twenty years to realize, but we’re entirely sure.”

“It’s never worked before. Why is it going to work now?”

“Because we’re committed to making it work. We love each other, Melanie.”

“Love isn’t always enough, Mom.”

She finished dinner in awkward silence, but I couldn’t take another bite. She dropped me off at SeaTac with a hug and a kiss.

“Have the best time, sweetheart. I’ll see you in six months.”

I didn’t have the right words, so I didn’t say anything. I just nodded, hugged her back, and grabbed my two suitcases from the trunk. I walked into the airport lugging 100 pounds

behind me, three tons of emotional baggage, and a very broken heart. In the airplane seat, after I boarded, I took out my journal, and wrote only six words. *Time to go live my life.*

Meeting Adam was the first truly eventful thing that had happened abroad. I didn't know anyone in my program, but had made a few friends that lived on my floor. Still, I was spending most of my time alone, wandering the city and writing when I wasn't in class. I wasn't lonely, but I wasn't settled. I was calling Trev all the time; his leave of absence from school turned into a deferred return, until that didn't happen, either. He transferred to the community college a half hour away and was living at home. Mom and Daddy didn't tell me themselves, but Daddy moved back into Mom's house, and my family was living some version of the American dream without me. Trevor said everything seemed good between them, but I had been walking on eggshells long enough to know their tolerance. If it seemed too good to be true with my family, it normally was.

I avoided calling Mom, and distracted myself with pints at the pub, words in my journal, and Adam's laugh.

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"I'm happy to see you again," he says from behind a smile. It's been two weeks since we got pints in the market; this evening, we're seated on the balcony of a pricey restaurant near King's Cross. After taking the tube to meet him, I fumbled my way through the throng of commuters in one of London's busiest stations and found him smoking a rolled cigarette outside, near McDonald's.

"Have you been thinking of me?" I ask, sipping the Gin and Tonic I've ordered while we wait for our meals.

"Rather cheeky this evening, aren't we?" he responds.

We had been texting the last two weeks, talking about the activities of our next date and when we'd see each other again. After getting drinks, I had returned to my dorm-like room, eager to catch my floor friends up on my exciting night. When they asked if I'd see him again, my answer was simple. *Definitely*.

"Not cheeky, no," I deadpan. "I was only mildly excited to see you, you know."

I find myself leaning across the table, inching closer to him, and *deja vu* hits me with a force akin to being struck by lightning. There feels like something almost magnetic between us; whenever I'm near him, I want to be next to him. And whenever I'm not near him, I'm thinking of him, his glasses, his smile, his laugh. Which just makes me want to be near him even more.

"This can't be anything serious, Adam."

The waiter walks over with our meals in hand, along with another G&T for me and Adam's fourth pint.

"It's too late, darling. You know I'm already madly in love with you." His right eye blinks into a wink, and my own mouth breaks into a wide smile.

"You hardly know me," I answer.

"Well then, tell me something personal. What's it like being Melanie?"

I feel my smile drop, and I hope Adam doesn't notice. Every time I'm asked this question, I freeze. The blood normally rushes from my face and my breathing gets shallow. It's impossible to explain it properly; there isn't a word for not completely deserted, isolated, but not a part of anything, either. The best word I think of is 'estranged.' From who, or what, I'm not sure. But I live each day with a sheen of separation that glosses over my interactions, keeps me from answering questions like this honestly. So, I lie.



“I guess there’s not much to tell. My family’s normal. My parents are married, and I have a twin brother. They were high school sweethearts, pretty cliché, I know. I’m pretty much your average American girl.”

“I can guarantee you’re not average. That’s for sure.”

My crisis averted, I flip the direction of the conversation. The more questions I ask, the less he does.

“What about you? What’s a day in the life of Adam?”

He tells me he coaches kids in tennis, and loves his job. He lives at home to save money, and has an older brother. Soon, the conversation moves to Arctic Monkeys and Hitchcock movies, the novel *1984* and our dream lives in ten years.

“I’d like to be writing, somewhere,” I tell him. “I think I’ll move back to Seattle eventually, after New York chews me up and spits me out. Have you ever been?”

“Once, when I was eleven. We went on a family trip, and I remember thinking the buildings were taller than anything I’d ever seen. That, and the people weren’t very nice.”

We sit and eat and drink, and the sun dips below the horizon in the meantime. The waiter brings us blankets, and we shiver in the London dusk until the same waiter informs us the restaurant is closing. I check my watch. We’ve been here for six hours. Adam asks if I want to go home, and I shake my head no. When I’m with him, I’m the happiest I’ve been in days, so we move to a pub down the road and sit for another three hours, until the pub closes, too.

I see Adam once a week or so, and spin myself further into the narrative lie of my life I’ve created. When he asks me about anything from my childhood, I give him abridged, often untrue, answers. I tell myself he doesn’t need to know the things about me I don’t even want to

remember myself. Each date, it gets easier and easier to imagine that the lies I'm telling are truths. They sound so good, and I want to believe them. When I'm with him, I almost do.

We sleep together after our third date, dinner at a beautiful, secluded restaurant that sits in a building extending over Regents Canal. He comes back with me to my dorm, and it's a fuss of unbuckling and awkward, unsure kisses. I've only ever been with Josh, and my lack of practice shows. Adam is sweet, though, and gentle. Everything is slow: the movement, his lips on mine, the building sensation in the middle of my body that curls and wiggles up and down my legs and spine until my body vibrates. After, he holds me and rubs methodical circles on the small of my back.

"This is already serious, isn't it?" he asks. I want to say no almost as badly as I want to say yes. Instead, I don't answer.

He leaves early, to make it back home in time for a lesson. When he's gone, I FaceTime Trevor, excited to tell him about my budding relationship. He declines my call, so I dial his number instead. His voice, when he answers, though, is strained and rough. Something's wrong.

"What is it?" I ask.

"I just said hi, Mel. Why do you assume something's wrong?"

"I've known you for almost twenty-one years, Trev. I don't have to see your face to know something's up. And a sly decline of my FaceTime doesn't trick me." His side of the line is quiet. "Are you still there?"

"I'm here. Everything's fine, and I don't want you to worry, but Dad didn't come home last night. Mom's worried."

"And?"

“And pissed. She didn’t sleep, and spent the whole night collecting his shit from around the house and leaving it in huge piles near the front door. She thinks...”

“What?”

“She thinks he’s seeing one of his old girlfriends, on the side.”

“What do you think?”

“I think she’s paranoid, but I don’t know. He’s been kind of sketchy for the last two weeks, but he’s said he’s just been busy with work. Mom’s been on the phone with Sandy for like, three hours.”

“Jesus,” I sigh.

“Yeah, I know. But seriously, don’t worry. Everything’s under control. Focus on you and being there. We’re fine.”

“Let me know when he gets home, okay?”

“Yeah, I will. Of course. Love you, Mel.”

“Love you.”

I hang up the phone and stand, gathering my things, desperate for some fresh air. I don’t know where I’m headed, but I figure I’ll know when I get there. I make my way out of Camden, towards Primrose Hill. I sit on the damp grass and take out my journal. I’m angry, and nervous, and overwhelmed. I feel helpless, being so far away. I think of Adam, probably on his way to work, and I wish so badly I was near him. I text him, asking when I’ll see him again.

His first texts reads, “*Miss me already? ;)*”

The second reads, “*Tonight? x*”

Before I know it, my semester dwindles and my final weeks abroad arrive. I finish my classes, and move out of the student housing into a small flat above a curry shop that I’ve rented

for two weeks. I'm supposed to fly back to Seattle the last week of June, for the rest of the summer, but I dread going home. Trev says it's gotten bad again; Daddy refuses the accusation of an affair, and absolutely refuses to move out. Mom is suspicious, hypersensitive, and completely distrusting. He says they've been fighting, and he's been trying to stay out of the house. It's never gotten physical, but when he explains the tension, I'm worried about them all. Daddy hates being called a liar, and Mom hates feeling rejected. I hate having a dysfunctional, confusing, overwhelming family.

I hide my reality from Adam, and while it's so easy to play make believe, it gets harder to keep the truth from seeping in. My phone rings constantly, whether it's Trev, Daddy, or Mom, and Adam just thinks my family is overprotective and a little nosy. I crawl into a bubble when I'm with him, silence my phone and refuse the real world altogether. It's a fantasy, a living dream, and I'm happy playing make believe. He comes to my rented flat on the Friday I finish classes and move in. I greet him with a smile, and a long kiss. I bring him inside, and we sit on the small leather couch.

"I've been thinking," he says.

"A novel idea. Do tell."

"Well, I'd like to come visit when you go home. I've been thinking I could save up some money and come to Seattle."

"Are you serious?" I ask quietly.

"I'm not ready to say goodbye to you, or this. I thought you'd be thrilled."

"I'm just a little taken aback, that's all."

"Well, think about it. I looked into flights and they're not too bad. I could come in August."

“I, um... Okay. Yeah, maybe. That could be great.” I muster a smile and flash it his way.

“I had an idea, too.”

“Hmm?”

“I think I’m going to go Scotland tomorrow. Just for the day.”

“Scotland? Tomorrow?”

“It’s a four-hour train to Edinburgh, and I’m dying to go. You have to leave early anyways, right?”

And just like that, I decide to go to Scotland. I had been thinking about going, but hadn’t made any plans. I guess all I had needed was a push toward intimacy. It’s settled. Tomorrow.

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I’m on a Virgin Train East Coast, from London to Edinburgh. It’s just passed half-noon, and I think we’re somewhere right outside Newcastle, because the group of grown lads that just got on the train have thick, Geordie accents that I can hear from nearly ten rows away. They sip from Foster cans and laugh with their big teeth as I look out the window. To my left is countryside, nearly as far as I can see. It’s picturesque out here, so green and yellow, with huge fields and massive trees and cows and sheep and horses and lambs and farmhouses and an endless blue sky with clouds that look stitched into the fabric of the atmosphere. Facing the front of the train, I look to my right and see water beyond the glass pane, expansive and never ending, starting from just below the bluff onto the horizon. The water looks thin, like it’s been stretched over a canvas of land. A distorted voice from the loudspeaker announces we’ve reached Berwick-Upon-Tweed, 45 minutes away from Edinburgh. I take out my journal and begin to write. Three lines make it on the page in three quarters of an hour. *I’m glad I’m going, and I’m quite glad I’m alone. There are huge cliffs and houses built into the hills that just drop off,*

*somewhere away. I've seen two castles and a hundred windmills and there's grey stone everywhere. I'm entirely somewhere new.*

When my train arrives in Edinburgh, I pick up my backpack from the seat next to me, and walk onto the platform. I packed light, fitting all my belongings into one bag for a twenty-four hour trip. My hostel is only a few minutes walk from the train station, and as I make my way up the steep cobblestone hill in the direction a local pointed me, I can sense a certain feeling in the air. It's like there's a purpose for my presence; my heart beats faster, regardless of the cardio, and I'm smiling like I haven't smiled in days. After coming through a narrow alley, I find myself on a main street, staring at the front door of my hostel. The check-in girl has a kind smile and an accent I can hardly understand. I give her my security deposit in the form of a twenty-pound note, and she hands me a set of keys. A laminated sticker reading *Legolas* and two keys hang from the ring.

"This one," she says, pointing to the larger of the two, "opens the door to your room. The other opens the locker where you'll keep your things. You're in 'The Lord of the Rings' room, and you'll be sleeping in the bed marked 'Legolas.' Your locker will have the same name. If you need anything, someone should be at the front desk at all times."

I thank her, and move to drop my things. I unlock the door, and notice there are six beds in the room, two of which are occupied in the late afternoon sun. The air smells like too many people and not enough draft, and I decide to explore. I ask for recommendations from the front desk, and grab a map on my way out.

There's a farmer's market a twenty-minute walk away, and I walk through a brand new city with open eyes. Huge trees line the street I find myself on, bloomed white petals hanging off the branches. I hear and smell the market before I see it; wafts of paella and freshly baked bread

fill my nose, and shouts of laughter and loud conversation come from the same direction. The market is small, set up in a parking lot, and after making a loop, I get in line for paella. Three girls behind me talk among themselves, and I hear their American accents. I strike up conversation and introduce myself. The tallest, with bright red hair, tells me her name is Amelia. Her friends, Lauren and Katie, smile and say hi. They're also from Washington, somehow, and we laugh about how small the world can be sometimes. Amelia goes to University of Edinburgh, and her friends are visiting from home. I tell them I'm just in town for the day, up from London. I order my paella, and am just about to say goodbye, when Amelia stops me.

"We were just about to meet some friends. Come join us."

Having no plans and no previous connections, I follow them to the riverbank, just down the road from the market. Amelia waves to a group of six others, four guys and two girls, who sit in a circle. A boy, who introduces himself as Russ, strums a guitar. I'm immediately attracted to him; his big hands cradle the neck of the wood and the strings with expertise, and the look on his face says he's completely at peace. He wears a cutoff band tee, and his brown, curly hair flows past his ears, above his shoulders. He has vibrant, live green eyes, and a Scottish brogue that makes me feel weak.

I sit among a group of strangers, chatting and laughing. Russ and I talk about the band logo on his shirt, and he tells me he's the lead guitarist in a band with his mates. We flirt easily, and before I know it, a bottle of wine and a J are being passed around. I take both happily, smoking and drinking with my new friends, until someone suggests we move locations. Russ looks at me.

"Will you come?"

"I have nowhere to be."

Russ and I walk in the back of the crowd that makes its way towards a local pub. Before we get there, he grabs my hand and pulls me back.

“I have to drop my guitar at my flat. Do you want to come?”

I nod and smile. He calls up ahead, announcing our parting. I hug Katie and Lauren, thanking them for their kindness and hospitality. When I reach in to hug Amelia, she whispers in my ear.

“Russ is a great guy, and from what I’ve heard, a grade A shag.”

I look at her, and she giggles at the shock written on my face.

“It’s okay! I just thought you should know you’re safe with him, if you’re feeling it. Meet us out later, okay?”

I say I will, knowing I won’t, and I walk back to Russ’ side. His flat is a short walk away, and there’s a common patio on the ground floor of his building. We take drinks and his guitar outside, and he plays me his newest song. I can’t express it, but I’m immediately infatuated. My cheeks hurt from smiling all day, and I don’t want to blink in fear of losing precious moments of looking at him. He sings and strums, and I’m melting into a malleable, goo-like putty. I think it’s a mix of the weed and wine and weather, but I’m so high, sitting in total bliss. He finishes, and before I can think, I kiss him. He pulls away for a moment, moves the guitar from his lap, grabs my face between his hands, and kisses me back.

It’s one in the morning, and I’m lying on Russ’ bed in underwear and one of his t-shirts. His studio flat is small, and I watch him fry eggs at the stovetop, my legs pulled against my chest and my back against a pillow. After we made love, we lay naked, just talking. He asked me about my life, what I was studying, what I was doing in London. When he comes over with our



midnight breakfast, he sits next to me and hands me a plate. I thank him, and tell him I have a favor to ask.

“Will you do something for me?”

“Sure. What is it?”

“Will you ask me about my family?”

“Okay. Melanie, what’s your family like?”

I take a deep breath and wait for the chilliness to settle in me, but it never comes, or I shake it off before it does. And I tell him. I tell him everything. I tell him about my parents, about the mess that is their relationship, about my father likely cheating a few weeks ago and my mother’s inevitable subsequent forgiveness. I tell him about their past, about the screaming matches and their codependency. I tell him about the accident, about Trevor, about choosing a school so far away so that I wouldn’t have to be close. I tell him every honest truth I have, and only when I finish do I realize I’m crying. He wipes the tears from under my eyes with his left thumb, and then strokes my upper lip.

“Are you okay?” he asks quietly.

“Yes,” I answer. “Thank you. I feel so... here. So present. Like I’m living in the moment that is my life for the first time in so long. Thank you,” I say again.

When the sun comes up a few hours later, I slip out of Russ’ bed and leave a thank you note with my number. I go back to my hostel and quickly change, determined to hike Arthur’s Seat before my train home in the early afternoon. As I trek up the narrow path on the massive hill, I think about the last twenty-four hours, and about the last few months. I think about Adam, and who he thinks I am. I think about what it felt like to tell Russ the truth, to break down the reinforced barriers and bare my most hidden secrets. From Arthur’s Seat, I look at Edinburgh, at

the ocean and the green expanse of rolling hills, littered with gorse. I think about what it's like to share myself with the world, think about the word estranged. I feel whole, full of life and power. I feel strong and capable and unembarrassed. And it feels good.

I see Adam once more when I return from Scotland. He doesn't bring up visiting, and I don't tell him about Russ or Amelia or even Arthur's Seat. I feel distant from him when he tries to kiss me, and when I shut the door after he leaves, I feel almost relieved.

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It takes me years to process those months, and it isn't until I meet Dean that I understand why I needed Adam in the first place. He gave me so much hope for what my life could be, and when I was with him, I believed the lies could turn into reality. He was exciting and attractive, kind and safe. Maybe because it was all so fleeting that it felt the way it did. Maybe because I knew it could never last, that I wasn't who I had been pretending to be. I was in love with the illusion, the lie I had told myself so many times I had begun to believe it. I was in love with the possibilities.

Looking back, it's all so clear. Adam was hope, Russ was exhilaration and truth. And I, back then, was on the brink of connection with the whole world. I was living the days that broke me open. When I got back to Seattle, Mom, Daddy, and Trev were all waiting at the airport. I hugged my family, and thought about Adam and Russ and getting back to New York.

Dean and I finish our glasses of wine, and then have another. Luc wakes first, and wanders out to the balcony. He crawls onto his father's lap, and I go to wake the girls. My family and I go for a late dinner at a pub around the corner from our hotel, and we're seated next to a young brunette who makes eyes at the boy sitting across from her, who wears round glasses, has big teeth, and a laugh that takes me right back.

**V****New York City**

My widowed wife steps onto the subway car at Union Square Station, marking her two hundred eleventh underground journey in three years. She is immediately struck by the distinct sense of the familiar and the frightening, as she often experiences when riding public transport. Today, the air is muggy, sticky, like the seat she finds herself sitting on. Grime covers the windows opposite and behind Lila's head, and handprints litter the standing poles, shining in the light. Posters advertising new mattresses and a delivery app for pharmaceuticals are plastered on the walls. A lighted sign is built above the doors, marking the car's location as it moves underneath the city, indicating where they are, where they are to go. There is an unidentifiable liquid substance running from one side of the car to the other. Lila lifts her feet in order to avoid putting her shoes in the wet. Being on a subway is hard enough without ruining my new favorite mules, she thinks. There is an imperceptible imprint of a switchblade in the right pocket of her jeans.

She looks beautiful, just sitting there, her crafted legs only inches above the floor. Her hair sits atop her head in a messy bun, and the loose curls I used to run my fingers through while she was still sleeping escape in tendrils at her hairline. Today, she's chosen to tie a silky scarf around the bun, and the material hangs down, framing her face. Ever attentive to detail, she hasn't changed much in the time I've been gone. Her makeup looks the same, with shimmer on her cheekbones and pink, natural lips. With exception to the new shoes, I've seen the pieces that make up her outfit before. In fact, I was with her when she bought that shirt, nearly five years

ago. It still fits her like it did when she walked out of the dressing room and spun for me, putting me back on Mount Everest, time and time again.

If I were any other passenger on the subway car, I wouldn't be alert to the way her lips are pouted into the slightest frown, or the way her eyes lack luster while looking around, but I am not any other passenger. I'm not even in the car with her.

As the subway begins to move north, taking its passengers uptown, Lila hears the rush of stale wind outside the rattling windows and feels like she is on an underground airplane; something about the way the tunnel walls move past her vision in a blur reminds her of how a city looks out of an airplane window right before takeoff, when the airplane speeds down the runway and heads get pressed against the vinyl seat with sheer centrifugal force. Her migraine has been building, pounding for about three weeks, the longest one she's had in a while. Pressure has built against her frontal lobe and throbs with the force of God. The blackouts that went away for months during JJ's first year of life come about once a week, but typically at night, and for that at least, she is grateful; really, the thought of falling face first into an unidentifiable puddle is nearly as bad as the thought of ruining her shoes. My wife has always been someone with an incredible definition of priority.

The migraines and blackouts reminded her of an empty feeling she used to get, on early mornings as a child, when a sufficient night's sleep eluded a young Lila. She remembered waking up for flights on the first day of family trips and looking at her alarm clock, bright red numbers illuminating the dark space of her room. If it was before five or six in the morning, there was a good chance the first thought of her day would sound through the little voice in her head and bounce around a brain that felt hollow, like it was a cavernous valley, prone to echoes. Her conscience would reverberate against her forehead, and she'd feel the thought dissipate into

the gooey part of her brain. Lila's hearing was plagued with small, sharp rings, and her head felt heavy with oozing thoughts. The emptiness would only last for an hour or two, until she had had a chance to adjust to the reality of the day, or maybe get a few more minutes of silent sleep, in the car on the way to the airport, or on the airplane itself.

In the months after my stabbing, Lila's hearing was in a perpetual state of hollowness, her head a haven for thought after thought that existed, floated, lingered, and echoed away. Her melodious voice shrunk to the size of an exhale. She stopped speaking, because thinking was hard enough. I watched from my vantage point in the middle of nothing, in the place that was the manifestation of her hollow brain, as the woman I loved grew mute, as her belly grew wide. Slowly, the hollow echoes gave way to a constant headache, and the two feelings mixed in her head like a cocktail of confusion. I felt helpless and devastated. I remember crying, screaming, shaking, pounding my fists, tearing at my skin, as I watched the world circle, as the sun gave way to moon and back again, as I lingered in a void that felt perpetual. I grew anxious, sprinted around the blackness, tried to touch, feel, know, see, until I came to terms, or the best terms I could, with the fact that I no longer existed. I had no eyes to shed tears, no throat to muster a shriek, no body to shake, no fists to pound, and absolutely no skin to shred. I only had the understanding that this was *it* – whatever it was, I was here, and this is where I would be.

So I watched the beautiful Lila Boon, in all her pregnant, mute, distraught, lovely glory, and came to peace with being nothing. I watched as they rolled my body out of the hospital room after the monitor produced an exhausting, monotone beep. I watched as my wife cremated my ashes upon my request, and I watched as she sat on the floor of our apartment in the Village, her belly wide in front of her, holding the urn that held me, or what was left of me, with her eyes closed. For the first few months, after she took my ashes home, I kept waiting for her to scatter

me somewhere, anywhere. At first, I thought she'd fly to Hawaii—it seemed fitting for her to release me there, let me float in the Pacific forever, turn into fish food—but I thought about our last day together, and how impossible it'd be for her to ever go back to the chain of islands, or see another O'Keeffe painting, or even go back to the gardens again. So if it wasn't Hawaii, it had to be Boston. It was where we had met, where we had fallen in love, where we, the Boons, had really started. But it wasn't Boston, either. The urn still sits on her side table, next to the bed we used to share. I wish she'd get rid of me, for her own piece of mind, but I don't think she'll ever let me go. She doesn't know she'll have me for the rest of her days.

Lila looks around the subway car in constant motion. Her eyes take in each slight movement, but her head barely turns. She moves her eyes around and around, noticing the way the man across from her nods his head to the beat of the music coming through his headphones. She notices the way the girl to her left, next to her save for an empty seat between them, holds a small notebook in her hands, and the way she angles the pen at forty-five degrees, scribbling purple ink in large loops. What I notice most about Lila noticing, though, is the way her eyes grow wide every time the doors open, as people flow in and out of the car. She looks from person to person, takes in their features, holds her breath until everyone is calmly seated, until she can judge the air and the feeling that lingers between strangers. Only once she feels comfortable do I see her exhale, ever so slightly, until the next stop comes.

Today, she gets off the subway at midtown, and walks two avenues away from the station, headed east. She moves among the city masses with grace and ease, dodging through throngs and crowds with the confidence of a true New Yorker. It's been ten years since we moved to Manhattan, but it didn't used to suit Lila like it does now. While she was always good at moving, she felt homesick for the safety and comfort she had grown to know in Boston. The

wide streets full of anonymous life used to make her sad, until we started exploring it all, the nooks and crannies of New York that we could make really, truly ours. By our fifth year as New York State residents, Lila could cajole with the best of them, the locals who had lived in Gotham all their lives. She was a natural; her neutral Colorado tone took on slight East Coast inflection in our Boston days, but by the time we had settled into our new normal in New York, her words came faster, and “coffee” became “quawfee.” She would smile her smile, and I’d think about how I could patent it, each and every time a tourist stopped her for directions. “They think I’m really a local!” she’d say, and I’d smile back, because her happiness was infectious and I swear she radiated light.

She keeps her head down as she moves, and comes to a stop at an unassuming doorway, between a Duane Reade and a liquor store. She buzzes the third floor, and once she hears a *click*, she enters the building. Up three flights of stairs, she makes a left down the hallway, and opens the door to a small waiting room that has space for one black, leather couch that looks weathered from weight and the oils transferred from people’s skin. She sits down, holds her head in her hands, and rubs small, methodical circles with her middle and ring finger against her temples. When the door between office and waiting room opens, she stands, and lifts the corner of mouth into a closed-lip smile, directed at an older man with whiting hair and a large abdomen. He smiles back, extends his arm in a gesture that welcomes her into the back room, and allows her to settle into a matching black couch, the waiting room’s twin, as he sits opposite her in a plush arm chair. On a side table to his right sits a large notebook and a pen, along with books that have titles like *Returning to Your Best Self* and *Grief: A Survivor’s Guide to the Future*. The older man stays quiet, and waits for Lila to speak.

“My migraine’s getting worse, or maybe has just plateaued to this forever,” she says, her voice barely audible, as if speaking causes the pressure in her head to pound. I remember her telling me about the migraines she’d get as a child, and the empty, hollow feeling in her head she had a hard time explaining, but that all had stopped when she started college. I had only seen her with a migraine once, when her dad had had a heart attack her senior year; I had held her in her dark Brookline room, after taking a six-hour train from the city to Back Bay. It was at a point in our relationship where she had broken up with me a month before, when the distance felt like we were on different continents, and when our schedules weren’t allowing for nightly phone calls. It was just too hard, she had said, to maintain a real, adult relationship. I didn’t agree, of course, and told her how wrong I thought she was, but she was adamant, and I spent a month in a depressed stupor, thinking I had lost the love of my life. When she called me, I could barely understand what had happened, her sobs wracking through the phone in uneven hiccups. I was on the next train out of Penn Station.

Her roommate let me in, and told me that Lila had been in bed for the last twenty-four hours, refusing to eat. When I opened the door to her room, an animalistic groan filled the air, and she rolled away from the light of the hallway before she had a chance to see me. I hadn’t expected a migraine, but I also hadn’t known what to expect. I walked quietly to her bed and slid the shoes off my feet before getting under the covers. I wrapped her in my arms and gently moved her head to rest on my chest, lightly running my fingers through her hair.

“Josh,” she whispered, tears wetting the material of my shirt, near my collarbone.

“I’m here, Lila. I’m here.”



I lay with her until her father got out of the hospital, four days later. When she got the call from her mom in Colorado that he'd been released, she was up in the light of day within an hour or two.

"How often are the blackouts, Lila?" her therapist asks.

"Still about one a week. I felt one creeping up on me on the way over here, but I managed to stay alert. I'm trying to keep them away from my days."

"I know you are. You're doing a great job. It's not easy living with pain, but you're managing."

"It's my new normal," she says. "I don't have a choice."

The therapist, a Dr. Douglas Frye, looks at Lila with sad eyes. In the two years since their sessions began, considerable development had been made on Lila's end; no longer did paralyzing grief, or agoraphobic fear, envelop her. Instead, they existed in the background of her daily life, little triggers that would flare when the migraines began to build, or when she was away from her son for too long. With Dr. Frye's assistance, she had begun to brave the outside world once again, and little by little, she had progressed to the point of returning to public transport. The first time she took a subway ride after my death, Dr. Frye was with her, holding her hand. It was a year and a half since I'd been gone, and she'd gotten Dr. Frye's name through a widows' support group her mother had sent her the information for. Their first meeting was awkward and sad, and it had taken weekly sessions for about four months before Lila began to open up. I like Dr. Frye; he is gentle, smart, and an expert on grief. His own wife had died in a car accident in her youth, and Lila loved having someone to talk to whom could both help her, and relate. Best of all, I like that he knows when to change the subject, how he knows when to lighten the mood.

“How is young JJ?” Dr. Frye asks, and for the first time all day, I see the old Lila. She smiles and the oxygen shortens in my void. Her eyes light up, her cheeks brighten with the blush of rose, and she exhales slowly.

“He’s wonderful. I swear he becomes more like his father every day. I see Josh in his mannerisms.” She pauses. “It’s like they’re the same person... The way he giggles when I tell him he’s being silly, or the way his eyebrows go up when he’s curious.”

Dr. Frye nods slowly, and allows Lila’s words to linger. As they sit in silence, Lila rubs her temples.

“I really think medication would help,” he tells her, not for the first time in their many sessions. “Cut a little bit of the pain.”

“Taking those pills made me numb,” she answers. Ever true to form, my lovely wife would rather feel every bit of hurt and hollow than see the world through a gray sheen. “I need to stay here, for JJ.”

“I understand, but we could lower the dosage.”

Lila only shakes her head.

“You’ve made considerable progress, Lila, but there are still more speed bumps on the road ahead. Have you given any more thought to our discussion last week?”

At this, the color disappears from her cheeks altogether, and her eyes cast to the ground. “I’m not ready,” she says.

“You are more ready than you think.”

At the end of their session, Dr. Frye leads Lila out the door of his office, and stands in the waiting room with her before she goes.

“You know,” he says, “Well, I think you know how to make the migraines stop. Keep riding those subways, and kiss your son. I’ll see you next week.”

Lila retraces her steps back towards the subway station, and takes a train downtown, her right hand near her jean pocket all the while. When she gets out of the station, she makes a left, away from our apartment, and walks a few blocks down to her favorite coffee shop we used to frequent for caffeine boosts before work. The barista, who knew her before her new normal, gives her a latte for free and smiles at her as she leaves two dollars in the tip jar. Next door, she enters a daycare, and grimaces as the sharp shrieks of children pierce her ears. She’s here for JJ, she tells the girl at the front desk, and waits for the woman to come back with her son.

“Mommy!”

Our son is a blur of smiles and loose limbs as he runs to greet his mother. He reaches for her neck as she squats on the floor to embrace him, and lifts him as he finds his favorite position on her hip.

“Say bye-bye to Jessica,” Lila says, and JJ picks up his small hand to wave at the girl behind the front desk.

“Bye-bye!” he says, and my family leaves.

They walk back home, Lila carrying JJ, and he leans his head against her chest as they move. Within ten minutes, they’re back in the apartment, and our son sits at the dining room table while my wife tickles the soft skin underneath his chin and his laughter sounds like the rolling waves we heard in Hawaii. I watch from my void and think that if I still had tear ducts, I’d be drowning in oblivion.

Later, Lila tucks JJ into bed. His room is a pale blue color, with white stars stenciled on the ceiling. Framed photographs hang on his walls: still shots from his first and second birthdays,

and a photo from our wedding, nearly five years ago. There are small, black bookshelves lined underneath the window, and a miniature bed on the far side of the room, where my son snuggles underneath a pile of white covers.

“Drew’s daddy picked him up from play today,” JJ says.

“Drew’s daddy is very nice.”

“Why does my daddy never come to pick me up?”

Lila pauses, opening and closing her mouth. I watch as she searches for the right thing to say.

“Because, JJ, Daddy’s very far away.”

“Can you tell me a story about Daddy?” he asks.

“It’s already past your bedtime, Joshy,” she answers.

He sticks his bottom lip out far beyond its normal range of motion, and if I had a heart, it’d be melting on the floor.

“Just one,” she agrees.

For the first few months after I was gone, when Lila’s head started to pound, she would whisper to me in the still moments of the night, when she couldn’t sleep. She’d lie in bed, her hands on her stomach, and speak so quietly I wasn’t sure if I’d be able to hear her if I was really next to her.

“I miss you,” she’d always start. “I miss you, and I don’t know where you’ve gone, but it must be somewhere very far away.”

I’d call from my void, shriek out into nothingness, in hopes that a gust of wind or a shooting star would hear my cries and gift her with a sign. In the hospital, on shifts, I’d always hear about signs from the other side, and when I reached the other side, I worked tirelessly to

learn. If I thought hard enough, felt deeply enough, yearned, wished, prayed, maybe something would happen. I tried for months to no avail. Only once, when Lila was giving birth, when I watched her wriggle in pain and bare her teeth and swear like a sailor, did something peculiar happen. I was jumping in my void, running around, wishing more than anything I were in the room with her, when she paused mid-push, opened her shut eyes, and looked around. The nurse to Lila's left leaned down, and told her to keep pushing, that she was almost there, but Lila just keep scanning the room, as if she could feel my presence. I wasn't sure how I had managed to make her notice me; it must've been raw, encompassing energy that had made its way from my void to her hospital room, but she shook her head quickly, and went back to pushing. That was the closest I've come to being with her, since I died in the same hospital where she birthed our son.

"There was one time when Mommy was feeling really sick," she starts. "I had a very, very bad headache, one that wouldn't even let me get out of bed. Your daddy was living in another city, but when he found out I was sick, he took a six-hour train ride to come be with me. He made sure I got better. He always took care of me, and now he's taking care of both of us."

JJ's eyes are bright and big as Lila talks about me, about us.

"Where is he, Mommy?"

"I've told you before, baby. He isn't on this planet anymore, but he's somewhere up in the sky, feeling really happy."

"Can you talk to him?" JJ asks.

"I've tried," she answers. "Sometimes I talk to him, and sometimes I think he's listening. But it's not easy for him to talk, from where he is."

"Why, Mommy?"

“Because it’s so far away, honey.”

“Why is he so far?”

Lila looks at Joshua Junior, and my void shrinks to the size of a pea. I have never felt so small. I try my hardest to send a sign, to skew the wedding picture on the wall, or make a book fall from its shelf, but I am nothing.

“I don’t know, Joshy... I don’t know. But I can promise you that if he could be here right now, he would be. I just know it.”

“I wish Daddy was here,” says my son. Me too, Joshy. Me too.

Lila kisses JJ on the forehead, and tucks the white comforter under his body like the tortilla casing of a burrito.

“I love you Mommy,” he says.

“I love you, my world,” she answers, as she turns off the light and walks away from his room, leaving a small crack of air between door and frame.

Lila walks into the room we shared, and sits on my side of the bed. She picks up the urn and holds it against her chest. Watching her, I feel nonexistent goosebumps prickle my nonexistent arms. My phantom body reacts viscerally to the real world, and my nonexistent heart aches at the scene of the woman I love, holding what I am reduced to.

“I miss you,” she whispers. “Our son keeps asking about you, but I’m sure you know that. How do you explain death to a three-year-old?”

My nonexistent lips pull into a sad smile. She is strong and fragile, full of life and pain. I miss the feeling of her skin when I used to run my thumb against her cheek. I miss her hand in mine. I miss her, too.

“I miss you!” I try to say, but I can’t hear anything in the blackness around me. *I miss you I miss you I miss you I miss you.* JJ’s door widens, ever so slightly. Did I do that?

Lila, unaware in the comfort of her bed, keeps talking, looking down at the urn in her arms.

“Do you remember when Dad had a heart attack, and you came from New York to see me? I swear, I thought you were an angel when you showed up. I’d never had a migraine like that, but somehow, you made it manageable.” Then, again, “I miss you.”

*I miss you I miss you I miss you I miss you.*

“Dr. Frye says that he thinks the migraines come from having too many reminders. I don’t know if he’s right. He says that because if the headaches stopped for a while when JJ was born, when I was distracted, they can stop permanently. He thinks I need to sell the apartment, spread your ashes, and move somewhere new.”

None of this is news to me. I’ve heard Dr. Frye say as much himself in their sessions, Lila going through box after box of tissues, her snot and tears on thin pieces scattered around the floor. Each time he brings up the idea of purging me—a new home, a new job—Lila seems to concave, deflate. I wish I could tell her that I think he’s right.

“How am I supposed to leave you?” she asks. “This is the home we made.”

Yes, but we talked about moving upstate when we had kids, getting transferred to a different hospital with less trauma and more check-ups, making sure we’d be around for the soccer and volleyball games, be the parents to chaperone field trips.

“This is the city that we made our home. Everything here reminds me of you,” she says, and that’s the problem.

“I thought the migraines had stopped for good, after they were gone for so long. I thought they might have been a side effect of pregnancy. But when they came back, when we celebrated JJ turning thirteen-months and I thought the fury of God was pounding through my skull, I came in here and thought about you and waited for the pain to pass. It never went away.”

I can feel her absence in my void the same way I can feel where my body used to be. She’s my biggest phantom limb, a phantom love that haunts man-turned-nothing. I think about how connected we were, back then, about how every bit of Josh Boon loved every pore that was Lila Shovale. *I miss you I miss you I miss you I MISS YOU but maybe the doctor is right.*

Lila puts the urn on the floor, and grabs for the switchblade that was in her pocket, earlier in the day. She sits on the carpet, her back against the bedframe, with the urn in front, to her left, and the switchblade to her right. She looks as if she’s about to conduct an séance, and I am mesmerized by the woman I love. I am in awe at the way she confronts pain by bringing it to the forefront of her attention.

She bought the knife on the way home from a sonogram, a few months after I died. She had stopped in a sketchy little shop somewhere on the Lower East Side, advertising hookahs and pepper spray. It was displayed on a silk sheet under the glass of a case, lying next to larger knives and something that loosely resembled a machete. Its small, silver body was inconspicuous and the red price tag indicated it was on sale. It was the first weapon she’d ever bought in her life. When Lila got home, she unwrapped the blade and looked at it for hours. She looked and looked until all she could see was her reflection in the metal, and then she set it underneath the pillow I used to sleep on.

Months after Lila and Dr. Frye’s first session, they stepped into a car together, riding it just one stop before Lila moved to the platform, hyperventilating amid passengers mid-commute.



The week after, they rode again, this time making it a little further. The third time, Lila blacked out after thirty-two minutes on the subway, and Dr. Frye held her limp body firmly in her seat while he waited for her to come to. Slowly but surely, she began to use the subway again, as a way to shake off the shawl she had threaded by crippling fear. Each time, it was with the switchblade in her pocket.

There was something about riding the subway, for the first couple rides at least, that made her feel like I was still there, but in all the wrong ways. She would be anxious, nervous, and tense, as passengers came and went around her, always watching the doors, with one hand near her jeans at all times. Couples would get on, hold hands, lean their heads on each other's shoulders and grasp onto their arms for dear life. She could see our faces plastered onto stranger's heads, and I would feel my nonexistent heart get bigger as I saw the hope and fear in her eyes. She felt too alive, like the weight of the moment was growing until it would envelop her whole. I thought about holding her close to me in the early hours of the morning, covered by blankets and the dark sheet of sky, and wished we were back in our fort.

The first time she rode the subway alone, she was on her way to see Dr. Frye. During their session, he praised her for her strength.

"What are the things that still physically connect you to Josh?" he asked.

"Everything," she answered. She hadn't gone through my clothes, and had only recently started to trifle through my belongings. It was still too soon, she thought.

A year later, she had donated my clothes to a homeless shelter in The Village. She kept an old shirt of mine she used to wear during college, my wedding suit and band, and the cork from the bottle of wine we drank when planning our future, all those years ago.

"I can't get rid of you," Lila whispers, looking at the urn. "I don't know how."

I curse the void, the nothingness, the empty thing that I now am. JJ's door opens a few centimeters more, as if by a gust of wind.

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A year later, I look from my vantage point as my wife and son step off a Boeing 747 and into the warm, floral Hawaiian air. JJ looks around with a massive smile plastered on his face, and pulls down on his mother's hand. He points at the tall palm trees and the birds of paradise that decorate the gardens outside the airport. Lila rolls their bags towards a cab, and my family gets in, heading towards their hotel.

In their room, as Lila unpacks, JJ watches TV. Lila takes out a bubble-wrapped urn and a bubble-wrapped switchblade from the middle of their large suitcase, moving the shirts and dresses she used as a barrier out of the way. She sets the knife and me on the table in the corner of the room, before they make their way down to the pool.

After five days filled with a four-year-old's giggle and a smile that thins the air, Lila leaves a sleeping JJ locked away in their room. She takes the urn filled with my ashes down to the lobby, sticking the switchblade into the pockets of her jeans, and walks to the back of the hotel, towards the beach. Tiki torches line the beachfront, and Lila walks nearly a mile away from the hotel, down the shore. When she feels fully alone, she stops, and opens the urn's lid.

"I never thought I'd be doing this," she says. "I never even thought I'd come back here without you."

*I miss you I miss you I miss you I miss you.* A breeze floats through Lila's hair.

"I can't believe it's been so long, Josh. It's hard to even describe how much I miss you. I feel like I'm a planet that spins around and around my memories of you."

A month ago, after having a migraine for two and a half years, Lila donated my wedding tuxedo to Goodwill. She felt better that day than she had in years.

“Dr. Frye says this is the best... he says this is the only way. I have to let you go, so I can take myself back. I have to.”

*I miss you I miss you I miss you I miss you. It's okay.*

She stands with her feet in the water as the waves crash into white foam. Crying, she lifts the urn in front of her, towards the ocean. My gold wedding band shines around her thumb as she flips the urn down to the water. Ashes float near her ankles, and she backs away, facing me. Safely on the sand, she sinks down, sobs wracking her diaphragm. She stays there for almost an hour, heaving at the reality of her loss. She digs a hole with her hands about six inches down into the sand, and places the knife she carried into the debris of shells that have evolved over millennia to tiny grains. She buries the knife, and when she is finished, she stands, and dusts her hands off on her legs. Her naked ring finger brushes against my wedding band, and she walks back towards our son.

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On JJ's fifth birthday, Lila Boon hosts a party in their new home in Greenwich, Connecticut. Toddlers run up to the front door of their modest house, bouquets of balloons framing the doorway, and JJ welcomes all his new friends with so much excitement, he nearly falls over every time someone else arrives. Lila is the perfect host, and mingles among the parents she's tried to make friends with over the last six months. Moving was easier than she thought it would be.

When the party is over and JJ is down for a nap, Lila dials Dr. Frye's number. He answers on the second ring.

“How are you?” he begins.

“Good... I’m good. JJ’s party was great. You should’ve seen him, he was so happy.”

“That’s great, Lila. How are you feeling?”

“Still good. No headaches, no blackouts.”

“What week is this?”

“Going on week fifty-two with no pain, Doc,” she says, and I think about seeing her around the hospital, when I was on a break. I think about the elevation of Mount Everest, but the oxygen in my void is thick and full.

“I’m so happy to hear that. I’m proud of you, Lila. How are things going at the middle school?”

Lila tells him about her new job as a grief counselor at the local middle school. She tells him about JJ’s soccer game, and about her lunch plans with Debbie, the sixth grade teacher she’s become good friends with. It all sounds great, says Dr. Frye. She fiddles with the ring on her thumb finger as they speak.

When they finish their conversation, Lila goes to check on JJ. He’s still sleeping, our little burrito, with a sweet smile lingering on his lips. My wife goes to kiss him gently, careful not to disturb him, before she begins preparing dinner for the night. She leaves the door cracked, and as she walks away, it widens two inches, but there’s no draft in the house. She doesn’t notice, but she does smile.

The space of my void feels eternal, like the length of a thousand Hawaiian oceans.

*Each day, now, forever.*

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## ACADEMIC VITA

### Education

**The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA**      **2015-2019**  
**Schreyer Honors College**

- B.A.: English with an emphasis in creative writing
- Enhanced Minor: Sociology
- Magna Cum Laude, Dean's List for all semesters

### Experience

**Peer Tutor at Penn State Writing Center**      **January 2016-May 2019**

- Work as a peer tutor, helping Penn State students develop collegial writing and editing skills.

**Summer Intern at Dystel, Goderich, & Bourret LLC**      **June 2018-August 2018**

- Read full-length manuscripts, either requested by an agent or directly from the submissions pile.
- Wrote reader's reports on said manuscripts, detailing the strengths and weaknesses of each potential book.
- Handled managerial responsibilities, such as sending royalty checks, scanning royalty statements, and reviewing potential contracts.

**Biological Science Teaching Assistant**      **January 2017-December 2017**

- Teaching Assistant employed by Doctor Christopher Uhl with Penn State University for course: BiSci 003. (Course Website: <http://www.personal.psu.edu/cfu1/>)
- Taught two lab groups of 12 Penn State students each week (24 students total), coaching throughout.
- Scored students' handwritten/typed journal work (approximately 120 written assignments per week).

**Intern at Modern Luxury**      **May 2016-August 2016**

- Managed Modern Luxury's social media campaign, including marketing and strategy.
- Assisted with event facilitation, client relations, and office management.

## **Accolades**

- **Paterno Fellow** **August 2015- May 2019**
- **Chief Education Officer,**
- **Kappa Alpha Theta Sorority, Beta Phi Chapter** **November 2016- December 2017**
- **Member of The National Society of Leadership  
and Success, Sigma Alpha Pi** **December 2016- Present**
- **Member of The National Society of  
Collegiate Scholars** **April 2016- Present**
- **Recipient of the President's Freshman Award** **March 2016**